

EC HO

Original Work

Crusher-P

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Illustrator

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM





電器屋眸 (Denkiya Hitomi)

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: A travel program that only manages to get across how much fun the hosts are having](#)

[Chapter 2: A home shopping channel that sells everything but a good night's sleep](#)

[Chapter 3: A comedy show that forces happiness when one really wants to cry](#)

[Chapter 4: A news channel that broadcasts the comedies and tragedies of some far off world](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Remix](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

■ECH01■

A woman in work clothes stood before a tangled pile of bodies.

Several boys and girls looked as though they'd been individually melted in intense heat, and then been left stacked together into a messy pile. The woman pondered what must have happened to leave these bodies like this. The pile resembled a puzzle ring made in extremely poor taste, as she attempted to find even a part of her daughter's body.

It was enough to make one feel faint. The woman in work clothes took out a box of cigarettes. With a practiced motion, she lightly hit the box to take one out and put it in her mouth. She lit the cigarette.

The light of the cigarette lit the dim room faintly.

In the middle of a remote rural town surrounded by mountains, a woman and her daughter lived in a small hut. The woman, in the middle of her farming work, was covered in mud. They lived by raising just enough vegetables to provide for themselves, occasionally going into town for daily necessities.

Thinking that, since this is one of those few days she'll be in town, they might as well pick up rice and other goods they're running out of... The woman let out a sigh, laden with tobacco smoke. Her daughter had died. Unable to live the same kind of life as yesterday, life had no more meaning. It was a mood that wouldn't allow one to lift even a finger.

"Even though you were a good girl who didn't trouble her parents..." she whispered to herself. Around the time when her cigarette was at half length, it got to be hard to breathe, so the woman spat it onto the ground. She stamped out the cigarette, which was still lit, with her thick boot sole, and scowled in reaction to the smell of fat that pricked her nose.

Strangely enough, the weird pile of corpses that lay in front of her didn't smell at all. *The bodies should smell of decay or death, she thought, but look like a piece of avante-garde art instead. Just a decoration, even.* Her daughter's body was so incomprehensibly joined with those of the other boys and girls that even her own mother couldn't tell her apart. Although they'd long since ceased to be

a loving family.

“You’ve really done it, haven’t you, at the very end...I can’t just cremate all these bodies and divide them up evenly by grams to give to all the bereaved families, can I?” Suddenly feeling sick after saying that joke-like line seriously, the woman couldn’t help but throw up. No tears were coming. She only felt surprise because she thought she’d be the one to die first. This was probably shock. Weirdly, it felt like her senses were being dulled.

She found the body: blended meat jutted out of the sleeve cuffs and skirt of the familiar uniform of the high school her daughter had attended. The arms had been left alone, painting a strangely grotesque picture, as if a human had grown 6 or 8 arms.

The head was lost. Because of that, its humanity was lost, and the feeling that this *section* was her daughter didn’t occur to her. Nothing would change, even if she stared at it forever. This section of body— *the bodies*, she corrected herself, must have been mushed together for a reason. This meant that, through her daughter, the woman shared a connection to the other teenagers in that pile and by association, their parents.

Getting involved with them would be troublesome, so she should probably leave quickly. There would be a hearing about this later, and an officer was waiting at the entrance to this morgue. Guardians, and other affiliated persons, were being called in to identify the bodies, but...judging from the state of the bodies, that would be difficult.

“Are you really dead? You...even though you’re only in high school...” She touched the surface of her daughter’s body one last time.

Something latched onto the woman’s wrist, and not even a scream could come out— her whole body just froze.

Fearfully turning her eyes towards it, out of the back of the body— from a gap in the worn out school uniform— a new arm had grown. Just as a cicada or butterfly would emerge from a cocoon, an arm emerged from the body and grabbed onto the woman’s wrist, who was right next to it.

Frozen in horror, she just couldn’t react to this abnormal stimulus. So as to call out to the officer who was waiting nearby, she turned around and opened

her mouth to yell, but no voice came out.

The woman had lived a life of seclusion deep in the mountains, interacting with no one, not even her own daughter— she'd almost completely forgotten how to speak. And so, standing in a trance, her mind had completely blanked.

Meanwhile, the arm had used her as leverage to slide out of the body. After the arm came a shoulder, and then a neck, a torso, a lower half...all of it came crawling out. The situation was, evidently, strange: this corpse— even if it was large— consisted of several boys and girls mixed together, and only had enough mass to make up one body.

Yet there was another living person, hiding inside...? Was that even possible? *Is this reality?* the horrified woman wondered, *Or is it a dream?* The situation was like a bad B-movie, and she struggled to comprehend its reality.

“Hanemori—” The something that came out of the cadaver raised a voice, which sounded like a baby's first cry.

It was covered in blood and some sort of filthy liquid, such that you couldn't even recognize its face, if it had one. The voice sounded like a girl's, but it was blurred beyond recognition. The voice was not her daughter's; she wouldn't know that name.

“Hanemori...Joururi, is it?” That girl who had come out of the cadaver spoke that name which sounded too strange to be a name. The woman reflexively muttered in the negative. Hanemori Joururi: no woman exists who goes by that name. At least, not in this reality. It was a name from the past, buried at the bottom of the earth. A name no one should remember anymore.

Besides, that wasn't even a real name: it was an unheard of, garish, unpleasant name. *She should have already abandoned it, thrown it away, and been free of that name long ago,* thought the woman, and she shook her head in order to deny it.

However, the bloodstained girl was not satisfied. “Then, who are you...?” she asked, in an awfully clear voice.

The girl clung to the woman, and she promptly shook the girl off. Powerlessly, the girl drooped and fell to the floor. As if dragged along with her, the weird

carcass of mixed bodies jumped. Wet blood still overflowed from the missing head, and for an instant, it looked like a simple set of facial features.

And it was ridiculing her.

“Please, tell me who you are? Who are you...?” the girl kept muttering, asking the same question over and over, and the woman kicked the girl away as she retreated.

While she was unable to form words, the officer outside had noticed that something was strange and come over. The officer’s footsteps, the girl’s questions, and the woman’s unconscious screams: all echoed throughout the room loudly enough to hurt one’s ears, eternally.

Chapter 1

A travel program that only manages to get
across how much fun the hosts are having

■CHANNEL1■

First was black, then white. They were flickering and mixing together—blackwhite blackwhite, blackwhiteblackwhiteblackwhiteblackwhite—Commonly called ‘the sandstorm,’ it was a phenomenon known only to CRT TVs; a nonsense image that felt like it could make someone go mad if they stared at it too long. Light and Darkness entangled, alternating and melting together.

I couldn’t stand to look at it anymore, so I tried to turn away.

“Oh?” But that would prove to be impossible. I can’t move. I don’t know what I’m trapped in or how, but I’m stuffed into somewhere cramped, and I can’t move. My arms were bent at weird angles and locked in place like I was dancing the Bon-Odori, but for some reason, my legs were properly sitting in seiza.

I looked like a new type of Buddhist statue, or like I was doing some sort of zen meditation from an obscure religion that nobody knows about. My entire body smells like rust. *Probably something metal is stuck in here*, I thought, *as there’s something cold and hard stealing my body heat*. It hurt, so I braced myself to at least try to move it, but it was useless.

“Urgh... What the hell is this?” I asked no one in particular, and there was no answer. *Well, this isn’t friendly*. In what was basically complete darkness, the only light being emitted came from the thing that was touching my face, which faintly illuminated the place. Apparently, it was a TV screen, but all I could hear coming from it was meaningless noise.

I’d like to at least change the channel, but there’s nothing even resembling a remote. It’s depressing, but even if I’d like to turn it off, there’s no buttons or switches on this thing that passes for a TV. In the first place, I can’t even move, so I have no way of influencing anything around me.

It might be because of static electricity, but the screen touching my face felt unpleasant, like a dusty blanket. Even so, I’m currently as powerless as a newborn, so there’s nothing I can do about it. *Really*, I wondered, *what the hell is this, this situation where I’m basically in checkmate?*

“Hrm...?” It’s not like today was supposed to be incredibly fantastic. In fact, I wasn’t expecting anything out of it. And I’m not really sure, but I don’t remember having done anything to warrant being driven into this unreasonable situation, right? God?

■CHANNEL2■

Let’s try to remember what happened. It’s not like I’ve got anything else to do.

My name is Denkiya Hitomi, and other than my unfortunate name that I can’t do anything about, I am an incredibly average 2nd year high schooler with neither anything special to brag about, nor to illicit sympathy. My height is average, and my weight is a secret.

Either my ancestors chose this profession as a pun, or they liked managing electronics stores so much that they changed their name.

The town I live in is way out in the sticks, in the mountains, and we’re in the middle of a slowly progressing depopulation problem. Even if the major home electronics companies or electronics stores opened a store here, they’d only be in the red (although they’d surely have some business), so they haven’t come over to our neck of the woods.

Because of that, well...our store is the only one in town that deals with those sorts of things. Even though we’re just a small retail store under private management, we’re still stubbornly hanging on, even into the 21st century. Being established in the community sounds good and all, but that’s just because there are no other stores around.

That’s why, if you referenced an electronics store in town, it would be us, so just saying “Electronics store” works fine (and it’s also convenient). We take repair work for home appliances, too, and management of the store is going fairly well. Also, I’m often made to help out with tending the store and stuff.

Both my name and my family business are in sync, so at school I’m often asked if I can’t get the latest model of smartphone, or to fix any broken machinery...

Anyway. Today, at the request of my parents, I was tending the store on my precious day off.

My parents have a stupidly strong commercial spirit, so they like going to the city to check up on the latest releases in consumer electronics. At least, that's the excuse. On the occasions they do go they're probably just cutting loose and having fun. Mom and Dad are still madly in love, after all.

Well, even I'm not stupid enough to get in their way. And besides, just going to the city by train takes about half a day, so I couldn't be bothered to go with them.

That being the case, I'm holding down the fort.

Besides light bulbs and batteries, we don't stock anything like necessities that one would have to buy daily. So on slow days, the store is basically empty. The store was so empty, and I had so much time on my hands, that time felt as if it had slowed to a trickle.

I don't have any particular hobbies, and tending the store is more or less a job, so I can't just call my friends over to hang out... Committed to being alone, I passed the time by solving crossword puzzles, skimming thick books, and staring at the TV with my mouth open like an idiot.

I can't actually remember what I was watching, but it should have been a boring afternoon spent slugging around aimlessly.

■CHANNEL3■

Well, I tried quickly looking back on today's events: my current predicament hasn't changed one bit, of course. I'm still stuck, and surrounded by TVs. There's been no solution or progress.

This is bad...because I've been tending the store since I was little, I'd gotten used to boredom. It's like nothing happening isn't a pain anymore, or like I'm more readily accepting of it.

Let's reflect. It seems like I really can't move a finger, and accepting this

situation will only lead to my going senile. No, wait, or would I starve to death first? I should be putting effort into being able to move again, and then raising my voice to call for help. Yes, let's go, my instincts for self-preservation!

"SOMEONGFHFHF?!" The moment I raised my voice, although that probably wasn't the cause of it, my entire body was rocked by a violent impact. That was dangerous; I almost bit my tongue.

What was that? I wondered. My surroundings were, as always, basically black, so I couldn't see very well. I can't really tell what's what, but it looks like not just me, but my entire immediate area is shaking, like an earthquake. My posture shifted weirdly, and I was shoved into even closer contact with the TV screen.

Something's been flipped upside down, somehow. It's a weird feeling. Apparently my face is pointing downwards, or at least that's the way gravity is going. I'm under a lot of pressure, and if I'm not careful, it feels like my neck will break.

"Hiii...!?" Obviously this was very painful, and I struggled to change my situation while letting out a weird voice. Having my neck broken under my own weight would be way too uncool of a death for me! And also, I'd rather not die.

This unnatural condition didn't continue for long, though, as I suddenly felt weightless: I was thrown into space. Being freed from gravity, my arms and legs were similarly freed, and my vision was wrapped in light.

It was a sudden change from before, when I could only see static, and my world was smeared in color. My eyes couldn't get used to the light, so I couldn't stop blinking, either.

The static filled TV screen that I was smushed against just before looked sort of like the side profile of a lonesome person, for a moment. It was probably just an illusion, including the minor feeling of regret that I felt at having parted with the TV screen's slight warmth.

■CHANNEL4■

It's not like I'm an idiot or anything, so even I have come up with a few

theories about this strange situation I've been suddenly hit with. There are several possibilities:

①: It's all a dream. This is the best, most proper explanation. Unable to withstand the boredom of tending the store, I was hounded by drowsiness and dozed off. And therefore, I am experiencing some sort of weird dream.

②: I've been caught up in some incident (this is just conjecture based off of my situation). We run an electronics store, so of course we also stock old model CRT TVs. We're a rural town, so there are old timers who wouldn't understand anything about plasma TV's or digital broadcasting. So, for those sorts of customers, we also stock a wide variety of previous generation electronics, too. Actually, they sell fairly well.

And so, while I was in such a store, there was a fairly strong earthquake and I was caught up in its collapse. I was, therefore, buried in the avalanche of stuff, and became unable to move while being stuck in a weird position.

This was also a very plausible theory, or so I thought. I mean, it was a fact that I couldn't move, and that my face was pushed up against what seemed like a TV screen... If this was true, then actually, I'm lucky that I wasn't crushed to death instantly under all the electronics and stuff.

③: I've been caught up in some sort of sudden disaster that I can't even guess at. A situation like: I've been thrown into another dimension, or I've suddenly sprouted psychic powers, or other incidents that outpace the scope of human knowledge. Something like what's in those novels I was just reading. Even if it's not something so unrealistic, I could have been kidnapped and am currently in the back of a moving truck or something, stuffed in with the TVs.

Either way, I'm bored with nothing to do, so I tried imagining different things. Whatever is correct, I'm still not sure of, and to be honest any of them would be fine. ① would be the safest and most relieving, while ② would put me in danger but also in a spot of potential profit. If it's ③ there would be nothing I could do about my situation so there'd be no point in worrying.

Really, there was no point in even thinking about this. Also, right now probably wasn't the best time to do so, either.

"Ooohh!" I flew while raising an idiotic cry. I wasn't flying like a bird or a

butterfly; no, I was just thrown into the air.

Humans don't possess the necessary equipment for flight, so all that's left now is the falling. Caught by gravity, I fell while turned upside down.

I tried flailing about to fix this, but it didn't work. *Ok, wait, my mind isn't catching up to this situation!* I thought desperately. *Time out, please!* I took a deep breath. Loosening the bandana I used to tie up my hair, I slapped my cheeks and forehead. It was a rule that, while tending the store, I had to wear a bandana and apron. The hem of my apron was fluttering, and I could see the logo of our store that read: "Monochrome Electronics."

No, wait, I realized, *now's not the time to notice that sort of thing.* I earnestly took in my surroundings.

"Eh, ummm..." I've been speaking nothing but nonsense for a while now, but I think anyone would do the same in this situation. I am...extremely high up. I don't know exactly how many hundreds, or even thousands, of meters above the earth's surface I am, but if I continue like this and hit the ground, I'm dead for sure.

It'll be death by falling. It feels like my life has constantly been in some small amount of danger for a while, now.

"An amusement park...?" I reflexively said what I saw, just like a toddler would.

■CHANNEL5■

More like in front of me than below me: in other words, the place where I'm going to land is an amusement park. My town is in the rustic countryside, so there's no fashionable tourist attractions like this. That's why this amusement park is unfamiliar to me.

It wasn't like a certain theme park everyone knows that one would see often on TV. It looked like a slightly off-putting, mysterious amusement park made by and catering to people of a different country or culture.

There was a castle in the center. It was an eerie thing, like a clump of protruding black tubes— much more fitting for a demon lord to live in, rather than a princess. Here and there, steel frames jutted out like broken bones sticking out of the skin. Around the castle flew countless creatures that could either be birds or bats. There was a richly colored swamp nearby, as well.

Several large attractions— such as roller coasters and Ferris wheels— were placed around the castle, as if to surround it.

All of them were designed to make you feel anxious just by looking at them, even though getting people to have fun should have been the main point. For example: the Ferris wheel had hanged corpses hung on it, and the gondola windows were broken, with something that looked like tentacles growing out of them. The roller coaster also clearly cut out in the middle, and had what looked like a skull riding on the tracks.

I can't see well because it's too far away, I observed, but there are also what appears to be a mansion and a palace, as well as restaurants and food stands. This place also seems to have the classics; small rides like merry-go-rounds, go karts, spinning cups, and the like.

Just at a glance, there are also several other things that I can't tell the purpose of: a jet black orb, a huge spider web, a head from some kind of reptile or something...stuff like that was everywhere.

Each one is mysterious on its own, but taken as a whole, one could somehow understand that this was an amusement park. If I strained my ears, I could also hear fitting music. The place seems quite busy, with lots of people walking about and looking like they're having fun.

"AAAaaaaahhh!" And, currently, I'm falling towards that strange amusement park from a great height.

It's not really the time for it but, letting out a sigh, I finally found the answer to one of my questions:

"I see. This is a dream after all." There's no way this is real— ① was correct, this is a dream. You're not supposed to feel any pain in dreams, but my neck has been sore from the pressure that was put on it before for a while now. Well, that's probably just a small detail anyway.

Stuff like falling from a great height should be common in dreams, after all. And all these utterly incomprehensible and mysterious events would be common in a dream, too. I was relieved. Once I woke up, I'd be back to the same old, boring, but fairly peaceful life.

Hm... I wondered. But what if I don't wake up? This stupid thought came into my brain. Nevertheless, it made my insides run cold suddenly, and I shivered. *Is this really a dream? If so, why does it feel so real?* The wind on my skin, this brightness, and the beating of my heart all feel very real.

Suddenly very scared, I started flailing about again. It was meaningless; nothing changed at all. I can't even scream anymore.

Suddenly, I felt someone's gaze on me. I did the impossible, and looked over in that direction.

It's probably my imagination, I thought, but I swear someone is looking at me. Someone on the ground probably noticed me falling from the sky, and that aroused their interest. *No wait, this gaze isn't that proactive.*

It's like someone who's watching the TV to kill time, but he hasn't changed the channel because he's not really watching. It was listless, with no interest, like someone seeing a pebble on the side of the road. At least, I felt that way— I have no real basis for it.

It was just like me while I was tending the store, staring at the television like it was a mirror that reflected my own image back to me. Like meeting a ghost by chance, it felt similar to that one, somewhat creepy moment.

I was being watched by someone. But it felt like that someone was me... I can't calm down, I've got the chills. Who is it? Who's watching me? Before finding out who that someone was, I heard the snap of something being cut—and just like a TV powering off, my vision went dark.

■CHANNEL6■

The channel changed. At least, that was the feeling I got.

Well, thinking about it normally...having fallen from such a large height, I

should have crashed into the earth and turned into a mess similar to pancake dough.

Someone— or something— changed the scene, as if they didn't care to see something so grotesque, or so boring. That's the kind of feeling I had. I can't really explain it well— it's like how, if you're having a terrifying nightmare, sometimes you'll wake up if you think about it hard enough. And someone other than me managed to do that *to me* . At least, kind of. It's very hard to describe this feeling.

But if that sort of thing was even possible, what kind of being would be able to do it? A god, maybe? Just who was it that, just like a story's author, rewrote my unfortunate situation?

I thought about what just happened distantly, as if on autopilot. I'm mysteriously calm about this whole thing. This whole situation is far too unrealistic. *This is probably all a dream*. Under that assumption, my heart is calm. If it's a dream, there's nothing to be done. Even if I panic, I'll only get tired.

I mean, apparently the protagonist in this mysterious dream isn't even me... All I can really do is ride it out while holding on to my consciousness, or possibly my life. Basically, that's how I've lived my life up until now; with lightness and absence of mind, I've just let everything pass me by.

"Oof." As expected, changing the entire world in an instant comes with a fairly hefty bit of shock. I wasn't affected by it too much because of how spaced out I was, though. After coughing and blinking several times, I took a look at my surroundings.

I gulped. With a hard swallow, I once again calm myself down by force. It doesn't seem that my life is in imminent danger— for the time being, at least. There's no need to move immediately. I should avoid expending my stamina as much as possible, and live passively.

"I've come back down to the ground. No, I was moved...?" I don't know when

it happened, but I'm now somewhere in the amusement park. A minute ago, I had been looking down at it from high up in the sky. It's *Terra Firma*. There was an eerie merry-go-round nearby, with a beheaded horse going round and round to cheery music. I sat down on a bench, which had been placed near the merry-go-round's fence. Right next to the bench was an unusually dirty and dented silver trash can.

In front of me was a crowd of people. For some reason, I couldn't perceive them well. These people, who seemed to be customers of this amusement park, streamed by endlessly. This scene was exactly that of a fairly popular amusement park on a holiday. And, wearing a high school uniform under an apron with a bandana, I definitely stood out from the crowd, even though I'd rather be blending in.

At the very least clothes suitable for going out... I thought. *Well, since that won't be happening, I can at least make things better by removing my apron and bandana.* Grabbing the hem of my apron, I reconsidered my decision and ended up just messing with the edges instead; after all, even if I took them off, I'd just have to carry them around everywhere.

Traveling lightly would be better in this situation, I think. After all, the people around me apparently aren't even paying attention to me, anyway. It was a waste of time to have worried about my appearance— there wasn't even anyone to show.

"Now, then. What should I do about this situation?" There wasn't any particular damage to my body; it was as if I'd been sitting here all along. I've got more stamina than I know what to do with at this point, so I could try moving around if I wanted to. But...I have no idea what to do.

It seems that even if I shut up and watch, this nightmare-like situation has no hope of changing. But if it won't get worse, either, my instinct is to do nothing and let it pass... Well, it's not like anything is going to happen if I just sit here forever, watching this weird amusement park operate.

If this really is a dream, I'd like to hurry and wake up: I haven't finished cleaning the store, and tomorrow is a school day, too. I can't just be stuck in this amusement park until the end of time— there's no livelihood to be made here.

“Hup.” I got up off my ass. I did some stretches. Actually, it’s creepy how real this all feels; there’s none of that vagueness which is so characteristic of a dream. It seems I can feel pain, too. *I can’t really act rashly here, can I?* While thinking that, I suddenly realized something.

“Hmm...?” I felt that gaze again. Out of curiosity, I looked around again, but there didn’t seem to be anybody paying attention to me. Was it just my imagination, or excessive self-consciousness? *No*, I thought, *there really is someone watching me— right behind me.*

Turning around, I found the merry-go-round. One of the horses— which had, just earlier, been spinning around with no connection to me— suddenly had what seemed to be a girl riding on top of it. The abruptness of her appearance there was unnatural.

And— I met *it* for the first time.

No. From the start, she (let’s call it a she) was watching me. It’s just that I finally noticed it properly, and, as a result, was finally able to perceive her.

It looked like a girl about my age; our heights were almost the same. And— I don’t know why— for some reason, it was wearing my school’s uniform. The uniform was a gloomy ash gray, like a cloudy sky, and hers was spotless.

Like an odd Buddhist statue, out of her back grew the impossible; there were 2 extra arms on each side. In addition to the arms that would have been there normally, she had a total of 6 arms. I can’t see her back properly, so I can’t really tell, but there are probably 6 proper sleeves back there, too.

That wasn’t the only strange part of her, though; her head looked like a TV. It was an old-fashioned TV, slightly wider than her shoulders, and had a worn out, shabby, bent antenna. The TV had robotic dials, reminiscent of the eyes of an ancient fish.

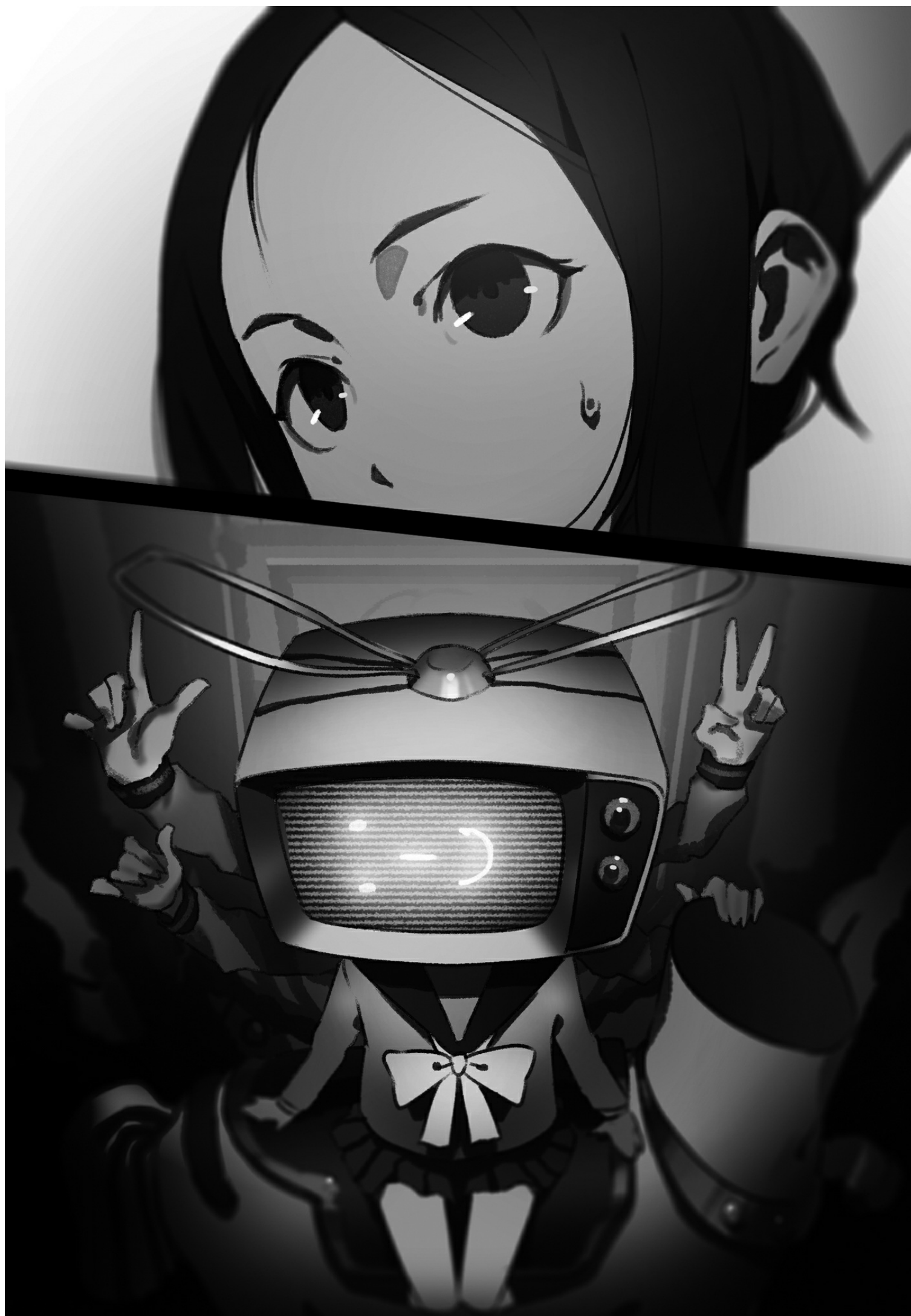
It seems that she was just wearing a TV mask, but she wore it so naturally that

one would think she had been born in it. There was no seam where the TV met her neck. She looked human, but somehow warped.

The screen was black, but it also displayed an abstract face, drawn sideways like an emoticon. It seemed to have a gentlemanly smile (this strange being seems female though, so maybe I should say ladylike?), but it had no humanity to it.

It might be because the face is sideways, but something just doesn't click. Or rather, it's supposed to be a smile but it doesn't look friendly at all... In short, I got the shivers. It was just like seeing a face in a stain on the wall, or in wrinkles on clothes.

It was *different*. It seemed like a girl, but I just couldn't think of it as a human being.



The merry-go-round had been spinning around endlessly before, but it stopped as soon as I noticed that creepy TV girl (so named because it's exactly how she looks). The six-armed girl stopped right in front of me, riding that horse with its head torn off.

Because she was riding a horse, the TV girl's head was in a slightly higher position than mine. I got the feeling she was looking down on me. Just like a toddler would look at ants around their feet, it was a look born of an absolute difference in status.

Because I was being watched by a TV— something I normally direct my one-sided gaze to— I could neither calm down nor ignore it. Instead, I froze up, like a frog caught in the eyes of a snake.

If I somehow spoiled its mood, even a little, I felt like this mystery person might attack me. No, not so much attack as *crush under its heel*.

"Um..." I gathered my resolve and tried talking to the TV girl. I didn't think I could actually establish a dialogue, though.

"Do you...have any business with me...?" I'm not in the service industry just for show (although it's just minding the family electronics store). I have confidence that I can, to some small extent, interact with any person. And, speaking from experience, as long as one can establish a dialogue...surprisingly, most things can be resolved, as long as you talk to them and exchange conversation. Even an unidentified, suspicious, or even dangerous entity would become just another person, unworthy of too much caution.

The TV girl was almost completely unresponsive, although I got the feeling that, for just a moment, some noise ran across the screen... Making no noise that had any meaning, she just sat there, silent.

Thinking it might just not understand Japanese, I tried several different languages from the English "Hello" to the French "Bonjour." But in spite of that, there was no response.

“Ummm...” I began tentatively, “At least for now, can you not stare at me so much...?” Feeling like running away, I lost interest in the TV girl after telling her that; if I can’t establish a dialogue, then that’s it. I wouldn’t want to poke the bear, either. I had done all that common etiquette demanded. So, trying to leave, I turned around.

It happened in an instant.

■CHANNEL7■

“That won’t work. That thing apparently doesn’t possess a very high intelligence. You can’t communicate with it. It’s like an animal, there’s no point in talking to it,” a soft voice rang out. For a second, I thought the TV girl had replied to me, but the direction that the voice had come from was different; it came from right next to me, and I looked that way instead.

And then, before I knew it, someone had sat down.

“Oh, sorry, did I surprise you?” a guy with an unfamiliar appearance apologized, while laughing. The town I lived in was way out in the sticks, so I know basically everyone’s faces. This should be the first time I’ve met him. He had an air that was unfamiliar to me, like he just felt urban, or refined.

The boy, although he was probably a little older than me, had a pretty face, as though an actor from a TV drama had come straight out of the screen.

He had silky hair that was slightly long for a typical guy, and his amber-colored eyes were definitely not Japanese. His facial features were distinct, making me think, *Aah, so this is what ‘beauty’ means*. He was wearing a leather bike racing suit, and had his helmet under one arm. That fact that his bike wasn’t nearby painted a strange picture.

Unintentionally, I started to stare at him. Without taking offense at this, the mysterious young man held out his hand to me in a natural manner.

“Do you know me?” he asked. He acted far too familiarly for an introduction. So instead of taking his hand, I became wary and stepped back. Seeing that, the young man shrugged his shoulders (yet even that gesture somehow seemed foreign, especially while he was asking strange questions). But I really did know

nothing about him, so I shook my head.

The young man said, “I see.” And then, for some reason, he lowered his eyes in disappointment. “I’m Kurashima Yuudai. I’m an actor, at least on paper. I’m pretty minor league, so I guess you wouldn’t know me after all. That girl is just special, I guess.”

“That girl?” After reflexively responding to his curious choice of words, I hastily corrected myself and told him my name: “My name is Denkiya. Denkiya Hitomi. Ummm...Kurashima...san? Do you have some sort of business with me?”

“‘Some sort of business,’ she says... Haha, you really are a strange girl, aren’t you?”

“Is that so?” I said, while thinking *he really is acting quite overfamiliar, isn’t he?* I was relieved that I had finally found someone I could talk with. All of a sudden, I noticed that the merry-go-round had begun to move again. The TV girl had rounded the corner and moved out of my vision, but her creeping stare hadn’t left me, for some reason. Unable to calm down, I turned to face Kurashima again.

“Umm... I’m sorry, but I still don’t know what’s going on here.”

“I don’t know either,” he confessed. “At least, not for sure. Also, you don’t need to be so formal with me— uh, Denkiya-san, was it? Our ages probably aren’t too far apart, after all.” Once again, Kurashima closed the distance between us while being strangely friendly. I’m not really that shy, but I wasn’t used to such beauty, so I flinched and drew back. My back hit the fence surrounding the merry-go-round. Somehow, I feel like I’ve been cornered.

“Please don’t be that scared, Denkiya-san. Is Denkiya your real name?”

“I get that a lot, but yes, it’s my real name. My family runs an electronics store, too. Doesn’t that make it easy to remember? Here, this is my store’s apron.”

“I see...” he said awkwardly. “Um, suddenly being talked to by a random guy...it’s probably hard to tell you to not be so cautious, but please don’t be too scared. I’m getting a little hurt, over here.”

“No,” I protested, “I’m not particularly scared of you, or anything.” While talking to him, I managed to calm down a little, and after taking some deep breaths, I asked him again: “So, really, what business do you have with me? As you can see, I’m a little confused right now... So I’m sorry if I can’t respond properly.”

“No, no, you’re actually quite calm,” he reassured me, “it’s almost scary. The other girls all wouldn’t stop panicking, you see. Aah, umm... There were several other girls, like you, who I’ve been able to talk to. For now, we’re gathering in what seems like a safe place to pool our info.” Kurashima kept probing and probing, talking and sounding me out while making it feel like he was thinking of my well-being. Without being discouraged by my attitude, which had been somewhat bad, he kept talking amicably: “If it’s okay with you, you can come with me. We have food and stuff... Your friends might also be there. You’re a local, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m a local,” I admitted to him. “Uh, did you come here from out of town, or something?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “I’m on a bit of a trip, you see. I like to travel, so I’m going around here and there on my bike. I’m taking a break from college, so I’m pretty free, these days.”

“My town isn’t a place for sightseeing, though,” I said in surprise, “so there’s not really anything there to see.” It felt weird to be having a conversation in this strange amusement park, so I started walking to try and cut this long conversation short.

“Um... Well, for now, I’ll come with you,” I decided. “There are others like me, how should I put this— people who accidentally wandered into this amusement park, right?”

“Wandered in...” Kurashima mused. “I wonder? Well, I’m not sure about that. But yes, there are several people, like you and I, that you can properly talk with. For now, there’s another two girls and one guy. There should be a national parliament-like building over there,” he said, pointing in a direction, and I looked that way. “That’s where we’re gathering.”

In the park, there are several strange buildings lined up. It’s true that this one

gave off the feeling of an extravagant temple that was converted into a seat of government. At any rate, for now, I don't have any real reason to refuse Kurashima's invitation, so with a nod, I start walking towards the building he'd pointed out.

Kurashima followed a bit behind me. "You really are calm about all of this, aren't you, Denkiya-san?" he observed. "Meanwhile, I still can't find a sense of reality; it's like I'm sitting on air. How reliable of you. Although, really, that just means a man like me should get it together."

"Ah," I corrected him, "if you can, please call me by my given name. I don't really like my last name— it sounds like a joke. And it's not like I'm really calm about all this, either. It's more like, this all makes so little sense that I've given up and calmed down. I almost feel like I'm just watching TV."

■CHANNEL8■

Inside the national parliament-like building was a strange space, piled haphazardly high with candy. For some reason, it makes me remember to back when I was a little kid: a space for infants to play while their parents were out shopping... This space was a paradise for children only, with bouncy cushions and balloons and the like spread out all over the place. The flood of primary colors actually hurt my eyes, and made me feel dizzy.

"Oohh—" It was a charming space that made me, as a high schooler, hesitate to step inside. The sweet smell crept up into my nostrils, making me feel even more unpleasant. If I was hungry, then maybe I might have been slightly more attracted to this place, but I'm not hungry right now...and in the first place, I don't eat that much, anyway.

"It's full of candy, isn't it?" Talking honestly about what I observed, Kurashima, who was walking slightly in front of me, smiled back at me. No matter what I say, he comes back with a friendly reaction. It's like he's treating me like a child. "You really are incredibly calm, Hitomi-chan," he was saying. "I've also seen too many bizarre things, so it's like my senses are somehow paralyzed, too. Well, at any rate, coming indoors seems safer than staying out there. Everyone else is gathering here, too. "Everyone else...ummm?" The

inside of the room is very dim, and I can't really see inside of it to tell what is what.

Hitomi-chan?! I fumed. For an instant, I felt like I would blow my lid at him for addressing me so familiarly. But I was the one who'd told him to call me by my given name, in the first place, so I swallow my annoyance hard. Trying not to let him notice my irritation, I look around the room.

I've never actually been to one, but this is probably what a movie set would be like: the dignity of this austere national parliament building only stretched as far as the outer appearance. Once you opened the the door, though, the inside was just a giant empty space. And that space was filled with large amounts of candy, piled high.

This was a weird place. In any case, while I was following Kurashima, I heard a voice call out. It was the high-pitched voice of a girl, and I couldn't quite place my finger on if it was familiar or not.

"Thanks for waiting," Kurashima said. "I've found another person, so I brought her over. Would you guys possibly know each other? You're wearing the same uniform." While talking in a relaxed manner, Kurashima climbed over the giant chocolate chip cookies piled around like a bunch of cushions, all the while smoothly extending a hand out to me. *He really can show concern for other people*, I thought. He moved as though being unconditionally kind to all women was instinctively etched into his bones. Saying thanks, I took his hand.

"Be careful," he warned me. "They're snacks, so they're pretty brittle." While saying that, Kurashima pulled me along pretty forcefully.

He had really smooth skin, unlike most men; I'm jealous. Because of my job putting me in frequent contact with metal and machine oil, I've become rather uncaring in that aspect of femininity. My fingers and stuff are basically ruined. Stuff like that has been all I've been thinking about recently, though. It's like, I can't get used to Kurashima's looks, so everything he does gets weirdly stuck in my head. As a traveler from the city, he might as well be an alien. Curious.

Having climbed over the chocolate chip cookies, I stood in front of an open space. Inside that space were several confections that seemed to be furniture, judging from their shape and size: cushion-like marshmallows; biscuit shelves

and drawers; transparent desks that seemed to be shaped out of candy. Chocolate bars serving as walls.

Actually, it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, because while it seems like this entire place would just attract ants, it's strangely devoid of life. Everything just feels so artificial.

"Ah, Yuudai-kun, you're late. I'm tired of just eating sweets all the time. I want something salty... My clothes are all sticky, too. I want to change, already!" I recognized the owner of the voice I just heard. There's probably no one in our entire town that wouldn't know her.

The girl— who, without even noticing me, only kept making conversation with Kurashima like a small bird— her name was Kagamimori Utena. She's the daughter of the leader of the Kagami Group, a major corporation that basically controls our town's economy, and is even well-known in major political circles.

Basically, her background is straight out of a manga. But she, herself, is basically straight out of a manga, so there's no point in complaining. Kagamimori Utena is the kind of girl who would never have any contact with a commoner like me if we didn't go to the same school. I've never even talked to her.

If I remember correctly, she's 15, one year younger than me, and a first-year high school student. She's a girl of small build, who hasn't yet shaken off that childish look. If I'm going to be honest, she doesn't stand out too much in the looks department; she has long, dull brown hair, and you can tell she tried as hard as she could to make our uniform fashionable. She has a strong-willed, even cheeky, face and attitude. She has no chill, and reminds me of a small animal. If it wasn't for the influence of the Kagamimori name, she would look just like a common child you could find anywhere. Even so, she's the Kagamimori's— no, our entire town's— princess. No one can oppose her.

Of all the people that could have been here, the most troublesome one has appeared. Normally, I'd give her ample space, so as not to get involved with her...but this situation doesn't really allow it.

“Hello.” I exercised common courtesy and bowed in greeting, causing Utena to finally notice me.

“...?” She tilted her head in confusion. After thinking for a while, she suddenly clapped her hands together, laughing. “I know you! I know I’ve seen you, somewhere...ummm...you’re Denkiya-san, the second-year, right? I remember, I couldn’t stop laughing when I learned the ones managing the electronics store were named ‘electronics store’! Hey, you really are Denkiya-san, aren’t you?”

Sigh. “Yes, I’m Denkiya. Uhhh...Kagamimori-san, was it?”

“Hmph,” she huffed. “Who else would I be?”

I tried my best to act sociable, but something hit Utena the wrong way and she looked away with a grunt of displeasure. She seemed to be even harder to please than the rumors said.

“That’s great! You two really are acquaintances.” Kurashima was sitting in what could only be described as the perfect position; out of arm’s reach of Utena, but not too far away, either.

Utena innocently replied, “We’re not friends, but we do go to the same school!”

“Hey, you. Denkiy-haha— Okay, I can’t stop laughing when I say that, so can you tell me your given name? Sorry, I’m not trying to be mean or anything. Please understand!” Utena talked to me without reservation, in a very free and open manner.

“You see, Utena has no idea what the heck is going on right now,” Utena said whimsically. She was referring to herself in the third person, as if she thought it was cute. “Like why I’ve even wandered into this weird space... Getting to meet Yuudai-kun, here, was really the only bit of good luck I’ve had. Everything else has been just the worst! I really just want to go home, or at least get into a shower.”

“My given name is Hitomi.” I finally manage to squeeze in an answer to her first question, although in that time Utena never stopped talking.

“Hitomi? Ok, then I’ll call you Hitomi. Or maybe Hitomi-senpai? That sort of thing is important, right? Isn’t Utena clever?” Even as she talked, Utena broke

off a piece of nearby chocolate biscuit and threw it into her mouth.

She really doesn't have any worries, does she? I thought. *She hasn't even thought of the possibility that all this stuff is poisonous.*

Well, she *is* our town's princess. She was raised with a lot of love, and that smile had not a care in the world.

"So you see," Utena continued to speak cutely, "at least, in Utena's situation, she wants to say goodbye to this place as soon as possible. She's been thinking of ways to do that, but as of now, there's no progress at all. You, Hitomi...senpai, do you know anything? Like how to get home, or what this amusement park-like place is?"

"Uh-" She'd been talking one-sidedly for so long, my brain couldn't keep up; this is because Utena says whatever is on her brain the second she thinks of it.

While I was trying to come up with a reply, her thin neck bent oddly, looking off at an angle to the right. "Hey," she said, "why don't you come greet Hitomi-senpai, too? We might be working together for some time, after all. Greetings are important, you know? Isn't Utena clever?"

Isn't Utena clever? I thought incredulously. She repeated that phrase as if it was her favorite saying.

Chasing Utena's line of sight, I noticed the presence of another girl for the first time. She was hidden really well under the cover of some snacks, so I hadn't noticed her. She was also wearing my high school's uniform. It seemed she was rather tall and thin but, because of her bad posture, that height didn't have much impact. I couldn't read her face, because she had it hidden under a set of long bangs.

The girl muttered something incomprehensibly. She seemed gloomy, even at a glance. I also remember her: she's from a year above me in high school— a third year. I don't quite recall her name. Even if we went to the same school, if we're in different years, we wouldn't have much contact at all.

From Utena's perspective, that girl, wrapped in a melancholic air, should be two years above her. But, I observed, from her gaze to her word choice, she's showing none of the accompanying respect.

“It’s hopeless, huh?” Utena said to me. “This one’s so rude. “Umm...she’s called Saba Torii; that’s ‘Saba’ written with the characters for raw rice. What a weird name!” Utena sighed. “Even her name is depressing. You can just call her Torii. You can just baaaarely see that as being a pretty name, can’t you? Utena-chan is-”

The slightly creepy girl named Saba Torii, who had a somewhat foreign-sounding name, whispered something in my ear that didn’t really have any relation to the subject: “You really like pretty things, don’t you?”

“Well, is there anybody that likes dirty things?” Utena scolded her with a sigh. “I’m telling you, instead of Utena you need to be greeting Hitomi-senpai. You really are unpleasant, aren’t you?” For some reason Utena kept hammering her spite one-sidedly into Torii.

“Now now, let’s all get along,” said Kurashima, who then stretched his long legs out, so as to come in-between them. He looked over at me from his relaxed position. “Hmmm. You’re all from the same school, but it doesn’t seem like you’re friends. Utena-chan and Torii-chan seemed friendly with each other, so I thought you would be the same.”

“We don’t really get along,” Utena protested. “She’s more like my servant, or a gopher: Torii is like that, you know? Utena is protecting her like that, right?”

Utena really is rather childlike in a way, referring to herself in the third person like that, I thought to myself.

Without confirming or denying what was just said, Torii looked at me with upturned eyes. “Umm...sorry,” she said. “I’m Saba Torii. I look forward to working together...?”

She didn’t really need to apologize, I thought. She was taller than me, so she really had to jump through some hoops to bend her neck like that and look up at me. That seemed like it would get tiring really fast, so I hurry and return the greeting.

■CHANNEL9■

“Hello,” I began awkwardly. “Hi, err— greetings! I’m Denkiya Hitomi. I look

forward to working together, too. What, uh...what kind of gathering is this, everyone?" Although, it seems that this is just a gathering of people who wandered into this place accidentally— in other words, a gathering of people who could actually hold a conversation. I was sure this was my dream, so I'm a bit bewildered at having that assumption destroyed like this.

Of course, there is the possibility that Utena and the others are just a figment of my imagination— actors in my dream. But if they aren't, what the heck is going on? Did everyone just get thrown into a different space, or rather, a different dimension? I've read novels like that, before. Those novels always had somebody who knew the situation well enough to explain everything, though. And, at the moment, everybody here has exhausted all avenues of information.

No one will explain anything. Slightly troubled, I kept silent.

"What kind of gathering? You know what kind," Utena replied. "It's the kind where everyone cooperates, so that we can all get out of this crazy place even one second faster. At least, I want to go back home. Are you ok with that, Hitomi-senpai?"

It was a completely understandable wish, I thought. Even I would go back home, if I could. The problem is: how we would do that...? I mean, we don't even know what this place that we've wandered into is, although it seems like an amusement park.

"For now, we should go around the place and investigate," said Kurashima. He looked a bit uncomfortable, probably because he was surrounded by girls. But still, he shared his good idea with a slightly troubled smile.

"What the deal with this place is, or why we've wandered in here: we need to find these things out," he continued, "and they'll probably help us figure out how to leave. For now, I think we should act with this as our goal."

"Utena agrees with Yuudai-kun!" Utena exclaimed, and then wheedled: "Torii agrees too, doesn't she?"

"I—" Nodding, Torii agreed after a small pause. "I'll do as Utena-chan tells me to."

"How many times have I told you not to use -chan with me?" Utena asked her

with a sigh. “Acting like you’re older than me... Is Hitomi-senpai also ok with it, If I refer to you without honorifics? They’re kind of annoying.”

I nodded, thinking *Do as you please*. I can’t oppose the princess. To us, who live in such a small town, that was an ironclad law, almost as inviolable as the laws of physics.

Satisfied with my response, Utena nodded, and looked over at Kurashima in anticipation. “I’m counting on you, Yuudai-kun. I mean, you took no time at all in finding Hitomi. Although Hitomi seems like she doesn’t know anything, either.” She smiled at him. “I’m praising you, aren’t you happy?”

“I’m happy, thanks.” Kurashima smiled tactfully, and turned to face me. “Yeah... Just like this, I’ve been using this building as a base and searching for answers, here and there. That’s how I found you, Hitomi-chan.”

“Utena was tired, so she left it all to Yuudai-kun,” Utena interrupted. “But Utena is fine now, so let’s go investigate together, okay?” Standing up cheerfully, Utena latched on to Yuudai as if it was her natural position.

Wow, how bold, I thought. Walking over to Torii, I asked: “Umm... Is Kagamimori-san acquaintances with Kurashima-san, or something?”

Torii shrank back a bit, as if to say *Why are you asking me?* Then, she replied bashfully: “It seems that Utena-chan likes him. She falls easily; always has.”

Hrm. So the reason Utena has been so restless when dealing with Kurashima was because she’s been trying to woo him? Or, at least, get closer to him. *Well, he is beautiful, after all...* While I was thinking that, Torii was moving slowly, so I took her hand and stood her up. I might also be acting overfamiliar.

Torii really was quite tall once she stood up. I found myself looking up at her. After lightly tapping her arched back like an old person, she said with a sigh: “Really, what on earth is happening... I can’t make heads or tails of this situation.”

“Yeah, same,” I responded. “Well, I guess sitting around blankly isn’t going to help either, so we’d better get moving.” I wonder if I should be speaking more formally? Torii *is* older than me, after all. While I was musing, Utena, who was basically dangling off of Kurashima, turned towards me vigorously.

“What are you guys talking about in secret over there?” she demanded. “Are you bad-mouthing Utena?” It seemed she was offended, as her mood worsened accordingly.

What a troublesome princess. I took great care to hide my thoughts as I denied her accusation. “No way!” I protested, waving my hands about in an exaggerated manner.

Utena must have believed me, as after several seconds of silence, she shook her head. “Ok, fine. But if you ever have anything to say, don’t leave Utena out of it. Tell Utena first, because Torii doesn’t understand anything at all.”

“That aside, Utena-chan, do you know where Kousuke-kun is?” Kurashima threw out another new name.

Which reminds me, he *did* say “Two other girls and one other guy.” There should be another guy around.

Going by the current trend, I could kind of predict this, but it really does seem that the last one is also someone I know. Mishiro Kousuke is my childhood friend, although, our current relationship is really just that of people whose houses are close to each other.

His parents both work at a company in town— which, in our town, means that they work under the umbrella of the Kagamimori group. The Kagamimori group has our town’s economy under its thumb.

Under that relationship, my childhood friend— who I used to go running around the hills with while wielding sticks— had no choice but to become the Kagamimori group’s princess’ obedient slave. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to live in our town.

Kousuke’s parents also had an especially deep sense of self-interest, even for big shots in a company under the Kagamimori group. He was Utena’s flunky even in school, so I haven’t heard from him in a long time now. That’s fine though. Boys and girls usually just end up cutting those kinds of ties, after all.

“I also ordered— no, asked— Kousuke to search for clues around the park,” Utena said, pausing to correct herself. “So he went off somewhere and hasn’t returned since. He really is slow, isn’t he? He’s more useful than Torii, though.

He's also really defiant, and doesn't really listen to anything I say."

"Then it's probably better not to move from here for now," Kurashima replied. "It'll probably be trouble if Kousuke-kun returns and we're not here, so let's wait a little longer."

"Whaaaat...even though I'm finally in a 'Let's go investigate!' mood we have to stop and wait for Kousuke? That guy really can't read the atmosphere!" Utena pursed her lips in frustration and patted down her body, here and there. Her movements made it seem like a bug had gotten into her clothes. "Wait," she asked, "where did my smartphone go? Right when I was gonna call him... Torii, you don't have a smartphone, do you? What with you being poor and all. What about you, Hitomi?"

"Sorry," I replied, "I don't have my smartphone on me, either." Just like any old-fashioned town, smartphones have yet to spread amongst us. It's a small town, so rather than calling it's actually faster to meet someone in person if you need them for something, whether by bike or something else.

Smartphones are a pretty high-class item, after all; even our store rarely stocks them. Although, I at least have one my parents gave me. Whenever I'm minding the store I always leave it in my room, though. Other than the stuff I was wearing, like my apron and uniform, I had none of my usual personal effects on me.

"What an inconvenient lot," Utena complained, looking somewhat lonely as she ran her fingers through her hair like a comb. "Well, it's not like Kousuke has a phone, either. If we really can't reach him, then I guess there's nothing else to do but wait here. Yuudai-kun, if you have a smartphone, give me your number."

"I don't mind giving you my number, but I also don't have my smartphone on me," Kurashima told her. Then he perked up and said: "Wait a second, does anyone hear a sound?"

At those words, we all shut up and listened. Having been told about it, I noticed it now; something was emitting some heavy bass sounds, like construction work. What could that be?

"I'll go outside for a bit and check it out," Kurashima said reliably. "Everyone, wait here." Smiling at us, he ran out of the front door.

Having essentially been thrown away, Utena staggered around a bit before giving me a face as if to say, “What?”

No, I don't mean anything by it, I thought, hoping that would reach her.

While we stood around blankly, without even exchanging any girl talk...the heavy sound, which felt like being punched in the gut, grew stronger.

Torii nonchalantly drew close to Utena, who seemed scared.

■CHANNEL10■

Escape from this weird alternate reality (or alternate dimension) in the form of an amusement park; if I think about it, that should have been the first goal to pop into my head. But because I had been thinking that this was all a dream... I had been taking the optimistic view that if I just did nothing and waited, I'd wake up eventually.

I feel like I'm rather good at accepting the reality of a situation and moving on with it. Born into a boring town, I became a high schooler without any fulfilled dreams or dramatic developments. The story of my life had basically no arcs; one could even say it was flat, but I was satisfied with that.

I expect nothing. Nothing interesting or dramatic will happen. This isn't a TV show.

But if we were to be thrown into another world, through the use of some sort of magic out of a novel or manga... Or if, like in a horror movie, our bodies were to be teleported into a different dimension... No, if this is reality, spacing out won't solve anything.

Take action, investigate, and find the key to the exit— the way out.

But, in reality, what can I even do? I, who am just a high school girl who helps out with her family's electronics store in the sticks, and has only average athletic ability. It seems that the other people in this group don't have psychic powers, or a convenient item, or anything else of the like, either.

“Ahhh~...” Because Kurashima left to go see what was happening outside, Utena's attitude was getting worse by the minute. Once again returning to a

cleared space among the piles of snacks, Utena sprawled herself out in the middle of some fluffy cotton candy and started playing with her hair sullenly. She should have been raised eating only the best, but for some reason her hair isn't that glossy or beautiful. Utena plays with it by alternating between pinching her hair between her fingers, twirling it around a bit, and putting it in her mouth.

"Umm..." For now I try talking to Utena, who was stretched out elegantly like a Heian noble.

With three people here, this silence feels so painful that I want to run away. It would have been fine if I was alone, though. I'm not the type to particularly long for company.

"So, how and why did you guys wander into this alternate dimension?" I asked, sitting down on an appropriately sized snack, and timidly sipping on some juice. There was a cookie shaped like a teacup, and right next to it was a pond of the stuff. If we stay here too long, I can see us all getting cavities.

"Alternate dimension? Ooh, you mean here? This place that seems like an amusement park...if that's what you meant, then just say it, stop being hard to understand. You're not a very good speaker, Hitomi," Utena replied harshly, as if she was taking out her frustration on me. She's probably lonely because Kurashima left her alone.

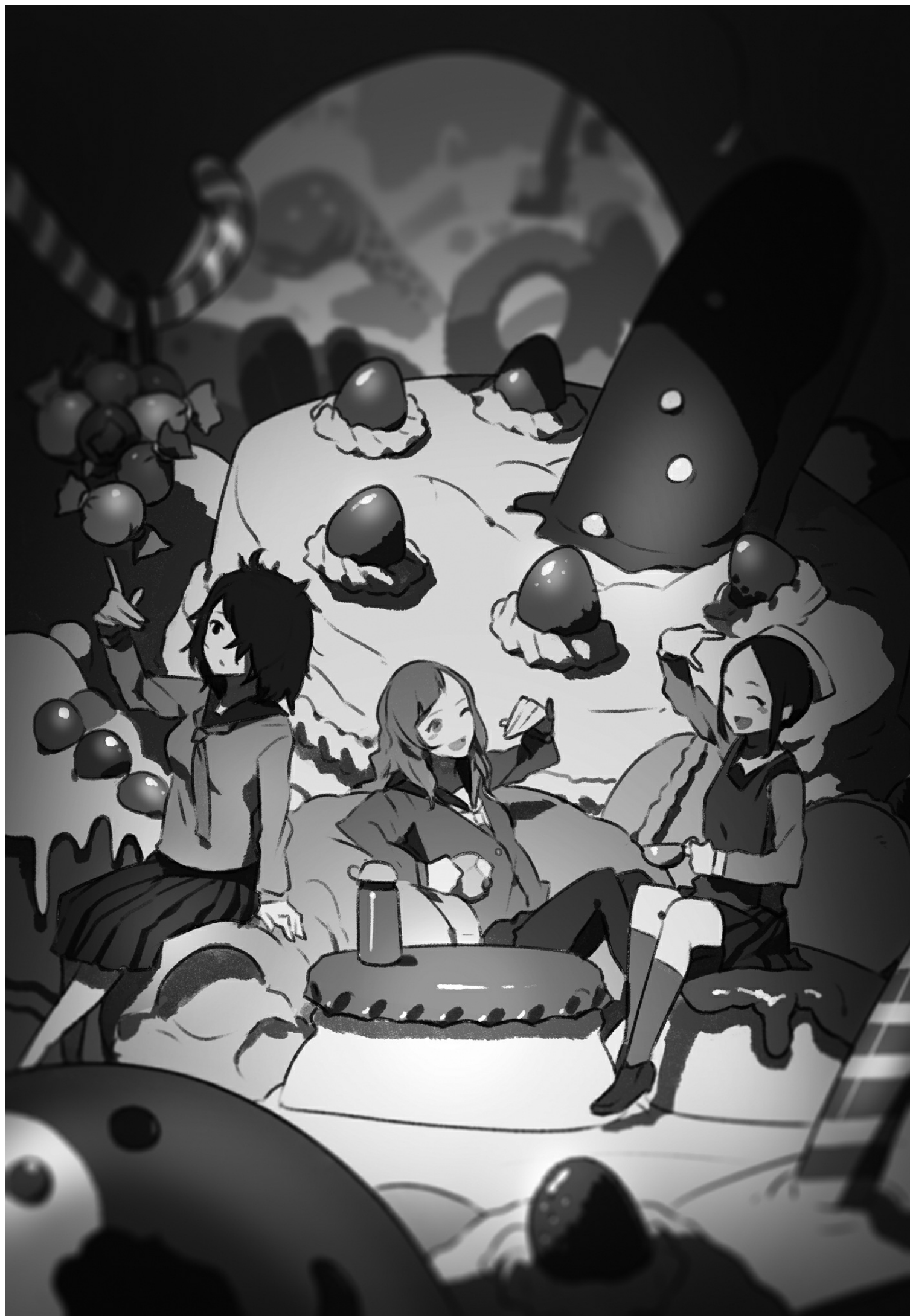
While faltering a little, I still try to remain friendly. "As for me, I was minding the hous—store. I think I must have dozed off or something, because by the time I realized it I was here. What about you two?"

"That's right, Denkiya! You're Denkiya-san of the electronics store! Hahahaha." After laughing too hard at that dumb joke I've heard a million times, Utena turned away with a complicated face. "Does Utena...have to say this now?" she asked.

"If possible," I answered her. "For now, we should really get a good grasp on the current situation, and to do that everyone should pool their information... In my opinion, it's not too late to take action after that. Even though I go to the same school, I don't really know you two. So I'd really like to cooperate and get out of this dimension..."

“Why ‘you two?’ You should just talk to Utena. That one’s an idiot, after all. It’s fine to just treat Torii as if she’s air, you know?” Utena seemed to have latched onto something completely unimportant, and she scowled. She looked sideways at Torii, who was seated right next to her but had yet to join in on the conversation.

She was looking off somewhere, stroking a piece of candy shaped like some fruit with her long, slender fingers. Torii looked this way for a moment when her name came up, but as soon as our eyes met, she hastily looked away. She’s putting up a ‘Don’t talk to me’ aura with every inch of her body.



Giving Torii a scornful look, Utena tore her gaze away and faced me once again. “That kind of thing won’t be of any use, anyway,” she opined. “Well, it should all turn out fine if we leave it all to Yuudai-kun, though. He seems really reliable, after all. Like a protagonist from some story.” Utena talked feverishly about Kurashima, who’d left and had yet to come back.

According to her, apparently both Utena and Torii had wandered into this dimension together (although the details of that were left vague), and were saved by Kurashima just when they had fallen into a panic. And by ‘saved,’ all that really happened was that after a meeting that felt like fate (according to Utena), he’d just guided them to this place that was filled with snacks, though.

After hearing that story and properly digesting it, I folded my arms. Utena’s way of talking was all over the place, so it was hard to understand, but there wasn’t any really useful information in it, either.

“Hrmm... In my opinion though, that Kurashima guy is—” I was going to say ‘really suspicious’ but thought better of it. It would only serve to ruin Utena’s mood if it appears like I’m bad-mouthing Kurashima, whom she’d probably fallen for.

Untouched gods don’t give curses. Talking behind someone’s back is...well, it’s a pretty common thing in high schools. There’s usually not any real ill will, it’s just a way to communicate.

At any rate Kurashima is...odd. A traveler from the outside. A unique existence, mixed into our otherwise boring but stable town. I can’t help but be a little wary.

Am I that kind of person that’s found only in isolated towns, that terrible kind of person that hates outsiders for no reason? In Utena’s case, Kurashima is probably the opposite, a special someone who will break her out of her monotonous daily life. It seems that she sees him as heroic and only likes him because of that, though.

This amusement park is cryptic enough, but thinking about Kurashima, too, is screwing my head up even worse. Slowly, I sip the juice and take in the sugar, bit by bit.

Sweet things are best for thinking.

■CHANNEL11■

“There’s a weird smell,” Torii murmured suddenly in a quiet voice. That whisper was so nonchalant that one would think she was speaking to herself, and it surprised me. Now that she pointed it out, there really was a weird smell.

It smells burnt. I think I remember this smell... This is the smell of a machine that’s short-circuited; the smell of burnt circuits and sparks.

Standing up, I look around, but my field of vision is terrible due to the piles of snacks all over the place. *Where is it?* I wondered. *Where’s that burnt smell coming from?*

“W-what happened?” Utena asked absent-mindedly. She probably didn’t hear Torii because, for some reason, she is treating the girl as if she doesn’t exist—or if she did, she’s ignoring her.

“Over there.” Carelessly, Torii also stood up. And, violently enough to surprise me, she thrust her hand through the mountain of snacks in front of us, causing it to crumble. Having widened our field of vision, she stretched her back. Torii is the tallest of us: tall enough that, if she fixed her posture, she’d be out of my normal field of vision. She seemed to be mumbling something that I couldn’t hear.

“What’s up? Should Utena stand too?” Blinking with surprise, Utena was munching on a biscuit topped high with whipped cream. She seemed well bred even now, finishing whatever was in her hands.

The heavy bass sounds that had been reverberating for a while now got stronger. *It sounds like we’re being shelled*, I thought. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this.* Wiping off a bit of cold sweat, I took Utena’s hand in mine.

“For now, let’s move to a place where it’ll be easier to react to anything,” I suggested. “If something happened here, all these snacks would get in the way and we wouldn’t be able to run.”

“Y-yeah.” Utena nodded. It seems that she was bothered by the fact that her hands were a bit sticky because of all the snacks, because her fingers kept

squirming around.

Her body temperature is strangely high, I noted. Is something wrong?

“Come on, tell Utena what’s going on...” she complained. “Ah, there really is a strange smell.”

Too busy to reply to Utena, I kept leading her around by the hand. We left the circle of snacks surrounding us through the part where Torii had crumbled the pile.

“Something’s burning,” Torii said. Looking enviously at our joined hands, she pointed hesitatingly in one direction.

Following her finger, I looked over. There was something shining through the dim space. Apparently there was a hole in the roof, and through it came light from the sunset, red like blood. Something was burning in that spot, lit up like a spotlight in twilight colors.

It was a TV. A common TV, just like the ones that surrounded me while I was wandering into this alternate dimension. It was dented and broken. Its surroundings were burning, probably because something got hit by a spark from the circuits. There was a sweet smell coming from all the snacks littering the surroundings, too.

Why didn’t I realize this immediately?

“A-a fire? What should we do? Umm, do we have an extinguisher?” Because Utena said something surprisingly pragmatic, I got shocked out of my dazed state. Coming to with a gasp, I regained a portion of my senses. “There would be one if this was a normal amusement park...” I said. “But we don’t have a way to put out this fire, and if worst comes to worst this thing could explode. It’s dangerous here, let’s leave.”

“But Yuudai-kun told us to stay here,” Utena protested. I tried pulling on her hand, but she resisted. She’s small, so if I really wanted to I could pull her along by force...but what to do...?

The TV isn’t really burning that intensely. I kind of feel like it’ll eventually burn itself out on its own. That being said, fire is dangerous. Our town is pretty old-fashioned, and a lot of houses are still made out of wood, so a fire would do

serious damage: the fear of fire has been beaten into us from early on.

“If we don’t put out this fire, it’ll trouble whoever is taking care of this place. Aah, but this place is that alternate dimension thing, isn’t it? Hmm... Maybe we really should give up and leave, like Hitomi says?” Utena is always talking. It’s like she talks instead of thinking, and in that sense she’s a person with no hidden side. She expresses everything she thinks.

Personally, I couldn’t do that— it’s too scary. To a normal person, that’s something that only our town’s princess can do, because she’s in a position to get away with anything.

“That TV looks like it fell through the ceiling.” Making a conjecture from the situation, I come upon an unpleasant premonition: “This might not be the only one. There might be TVs falling, one after another. We’ll die if we get hit with one directly, and it would be hard to dodge here because our field of view is bad. For now, let’s go outside.”

“Yeah. I understand, because Utena is clever. But why are the TVs falling?” Utena asked the question no one has an answer to. It’s difficult to even theorize the cause and effect of things that happen in this mysterious dimension. It makes me want to abandon thought.

“For now, let’s just lea—” Growing impatient, I somewhat forcibly cut off Utena’s questions, temporarily letting go of her hand to give her a push on the back. We head towards the exit, and Torii follows a bit behind us.

“Let’s hurry,” I announced. Just as we sped up, it happened:

As I had expected, the TVs fell one after the other, breaking through the ceiling. Luckily, they weren’t on a course to hit us, and instead crashed into the mountain of snacks. The sweets scattered, becoming powder and dispersing into the air, making the pervasive sweet smell even stronger.

With a start, Utena took the lead and ran towards the exit without saying anything.

The colors of the sunset shone haphazardly through the holes in the ceiling. The sounds of explosions reverberated off of the walls and ceiling, forming a strange echo. *Aahh*, I lamented, *it doesn’t seem like we’re allowed to take it*

easy any more.

■CHANNEL12■

Outside of the mock parliament building was the usual amusement park.

What a strange sight— although, from what I saw when I passed by here before, some of the details are different, like the lined up buildings and attractions are subtly changing. I don't remember clearly, so it might just be my imagination, though.

Distancing ourselves from the building, I chased after Utena, who was running fairly desperately, enough to seem like she would fall any second. And then I turned around.

My sight was blocked by the tall Torii, who was behind us, so I stepped over to the side. Once again, I looked back at the building we were just in— and was struck dumb by what I saw there. The building was burning rather bizarrely, as if it was made out of paper. There were flames wrapped around the whole thing and, like paper, it crumpled while it burned before collapsing. Sparks flew all around, and some sound rang out that hurt my ears. Soon the building will burn down entirely, at this rate.

I understand that the building caught fire because of the falling TVs, but this fire is too strong. If we kept loitering around in that building we would have definitely been consumed by the flames and been sent to meet our maker.

“Woah.” Dumbfounded, I stared at the giant fire. For some reason the surrounding buildings gave no hint of catching fire, but from how violently the building was burning, we should be as far away as we can get.

Let's put a little more distance between us and the fire... Belatedly, I realized that I was just exposed to a very real threat on my life, and my legs started to shake. It seems Utena was the same, as she kept opening and closing her mouth with no words coming out.

I wonder if the concept of time exists in this strange space? Our surroundings have definitely begun to darken in the sunset. It'll probably progress into night, eventually— but just like a real amusement park, lights started coming on here

and there.

If this place isn't open during the night, too, it should eventually become closing time. Somehow, the number of visitors whose faces I couldn't perceive well seem to have dwindled. It was a vaguely sad sight.

The heat from the fire felt like it was sticking to me. Hating this sensation, I gave Utena a push on the back and aimlessly started to distance ourselves even more. I just noticed, but my hand was dirty with soot, and I left a black handprint on the back of Utena's uniform. She'll probably be mad if she notices. All of our faces and clothes are probably already dirty with soot, though. Kicked out and with nowhere to go, we continued wandering around the park.

"Wow, what a fire," Torii, who followed us quietly, muttered to herself. "Even from far away, you can tell that it's a fire. Kurashima-san should have noticed."

"It really is weird, isn't it," I agreed with her. "I wonder where he is?"

It seems Torii meant to say that to herself, because when I replied to her she seemed surprised, and suddenly went quiet. What a weird person.

"Yeah, I'm worried about him," Utena sullenly interjected. "He told us to wait there, but the entire building's burnt down, hasn't it... What should we do? Ahhhhhh I want to take a bath. This is the worst. The worst. The worst!" Half crying, Utena repeatedly hit her hands against her skirt. She was probably planning to pat off the dust, but it had the opposite effect, covering her skirt in soot.

"Hey—" Looking up, Utena's eyes were opened wide like a circle.

"Huh? What?" Prompted by her words, I followed her line of sight. On top of the building we were just in stood something black, backlit by the sunset and the fire— I saw a huge arm. Like a shadow puppet, it was black and flat looking, in the shape of an abnormally gigantic arm.

That hand was gripping something that looked like chopsticks...no...a set of tongs. Occasionally reaching towards the ground, it used those tongs to pick something up.

It picked up things like the trash cans placed around the park, or colorful and cutely decorated long and narrow buildings— which were probably something

like a warehouse or storage space for tools.

It picked them up and carried them off somewhere. The hand was pretty sloppy about it, and sometimes the trash cans would turn upside down, spilling their contents.

The TVs that rained down on the building we had been in were, apparently, byproducts of this. There was a long and narrow building, that had previously been packed full with TVs, which was spilling its contents. Punching buildings full of holes like meteorites, the TVs were causing major damage.

What the heck is that... It seems like something that cleans the park and retrieves all the trash. But it's way too big, and even more suspicious.

Or rather...

"Oohh," I realized, "So that was it." The reason I was falling from so high up when I wandered in here was because I was inside whatever that weird janitor(?) with the tongs had been picking up. And I had fallen out of that and onto the earth.

Although how I'm fine after falling from that height is still a mystery. Somehow, some part of me feels like it's not worth worrying about... I felt refreshed after finally getting an answer. If asked "So what" I'd have a hard time answering, but I suppose this information confirmed that this strange space has a concept of causality— that it follows, at least, some sort of logic or rules. I'm somewhat relieved.

This means that as long as you follow the right steps, it's possible to escape from this amusement-park-shaped alternate dimension. My life is getting put in danger pretty frequently here, so I'd like to quit this place as soon as possible. Still, what should I do? At this moment, we still haven't found a clue about how to leave.

Next to me, busy groaning in tortured thought, Utena looked lonely as she caressed her own cheek. "I wonder where Yuudai-kun went. We should meet up— it really is inconvenient not to have a smartphone in these situations. I'm a bit tired, so I'll take a rest." Stating this so one-sidedly, Utena sat down on a nearby bench, and whether it was because she'd just started to get tired, or because she was relieved to have evaded the danger, started nodding off.

Resting because she's tired, I thought, she's a child that will only do what she wants.

Torii came up behind Utena, who was sitting on the bench, and— for some reason— chose to stand there. It didn't really feel right for me to sit down and rest next to Utena while Torii, who was older than me, remained standing, so I just stood still, instead.

■CHANNEL13■

"...Hmm?" Suddenly, I realized that I could feel someone's gaze on me. I wonder if that creepy TV girl is watching again from somewhere?

Looking around restlessly, I saw it; from a ways away, someone was beckoning to me. It seemed to be a mascot, which are common in amusement parks. It had a peculiar design, and I couldn't quite tell if I had seen it before or not. I couldn't figure out what kind of animal it was designed after. A bear? dog? cat?

Anyway, for a while now, it's been beckoning to me. I was strangely curious, and felt like I'd seen it before— that gesture, anyway.

"Hey, that mascot, what is it?" I tried asking, but Utena had fallen asleep, so there was no response. *She's really got guts doing that in this situation*, I observed. Or rather, she really is a child who just does what she wants. If she gets sleepy, she sleeps.

When it didn't seem like I'd get an answer from Utena, Torii replied instead: "If you're curious, you can go take a look... For now, we should stay in eyesight of each other, though. Oh, but it might be dangerous, and Utena-chan fell asleep..."

"Okay," I said. "Torii-san, please watch over Utena-san while I'm away." I just can't help being curious about it, so I decide to head over to the mascot. There's no way that it'll suddenly bring out an axe or something and attack me with it. Probably. Well, there's no way I can say for sure here, but if it seems dangerous, I can just run away. At the very least, I think it's a better use of time than sitting here and watching Utena sleep.

We've grouped up by chance, but it's not like our fates are one or anything. It's not like they're family, or even friends. There's no real reason to stick together at all times. It's just that they're the only ones I can talk to in this mystery park... I am thankful for their existence, just because they're people just like me.

"Torii-san...?" Making sure that Utena was completely asleep, I asked Torii a question that had been bothering me for a while because I thought this was a good opportunity. "Torii-san, why are you so...uhh...nice, to Utena-san?"

"What do you mean?" she replied. My question was phrased badly, so Torii didn't seem to get it. Scratching my head in thought, I realized that I still had my bandana on; its familiar feeling was, somehow, out of place.

Taking a deep breath, I asked again: "It just seems like you're being bullied by her." It was a pretty famous story in our school. Utena is the princess of our school— no, our entire town. No one can oppose her. If Utena says something is white, even something black would become white.

And that girl is bullying Torii. Because Utena's surroundings harmonized with her, she had an entourage that also surrounded Torii and pushed her around regularly. Her personal belongings would also be stolen and hidden, and her desk graffitied on. Torii was also subject to being made a fool of and abused—the slander would make one's ears bleed. All that made Utena happy, and she endorsed such behavior.

At least, those were the rumors I'd heard and they seemed true, based on what I'd seen. In our school, it's common sense. There aren't any students who would have memorized the school rules, but at some point a different set of rules had popped up among the students, and everyone knew the reason why. If they didn't, they wouldn't be able to survive in the microcosm known as "school."

That's why there was no choice. My childhood friend, Kousuke, who had also become Utena's flunky, is also probably complicit in that bullying. I'm just a little saddened by the fact that a guy who I kind of liked and played with a lot in the past is now nowhere to be found. Although it was only a little, I lost "something I liked." It's that feeling of getting frustrated at being helpless, like

the world has just been dyed a little blacker.

But that had nothing to do with me. I had to stay unrelated to that stuff, see no evil hear no evil. Right now, though, in this strange place, I had no choice but to interact with Utena and Torii. I can't ignore them, and without making sure of various things I can't make a move, either.

Is it true that Torii is being bullied? If so, how bad is it? I have to find out. If I stay ignorant and keep interacting with them, I'll probably get caught up in some catastrophe.

I'd like to avoid that.

Is it right to fall in line with Utena, and bully Torii myself? Or should I protect Torii from Utena, and work up some friendship with her? Or should I stay the course, keeping a certain amount of distance between us, all while pretending like nothing is happening?

I can't calm down if I don't figure this out. If I could just find my position in this hierarchy, I could stay there peacefully till the end of time. As it is, I'm writhing in this uncertainty.

"Bullying... Oh, so that's what you think this is." After a large gap in the conversation, Torii finally opened her mouth. She made a face that said *Utena is asleep, and there's no one else to answer, so I guess it has to be me.*

"That's not it," she continued. Like a ghost without a will of its own, she spoke like this was somebody else's problem. "Utena-chan, you see, she's probably...just scared of me." Torii's bangs are really long, so they cover both her eyes. That's why all I could see of her face was her mouth. It looked like she was smiling, but her mouth was just a little crooked, so I couldn't really tell if she was actually laughing.

It was like an emoji. Her laugh was like someone just adding "lol" or a fun emoji at the end of a chat message. On the other side of the screen, the person could be grinding their teeth in hatred for all you know.

"That's why she's so desperately trying to erase me," Torii explained, "and make it like I never existed. What a stupid, no, what a sad girl. Get involved with me, and all that will be left are scars. She doesn't know that. Hey, do you

understand what I'm trying to say?" Torii softly brushed around the sleeping Utena's eyes. Like she was shielding them from the world. "I won't let her run. Only her, I will never let free... So that every morning, when she looks in the mirror, she will think of me. I'm going to brand myself inside of her," she said. Her laughter sounded like some sort of code.

■ECHO2■

There was the sound of the channel changing.

That's not possible. There's nothing civilized, like a working TV, in my house. I probably just misheard. Thinking that, Sayuri hung her jacket on the wall of her house, which was a very old and worn mountain cabin. Age caused the nails to stick out from the wooden walls, and she hung her jacket on one of these. It'd be nice if she had a hanger, but every time she went down into town to buy one, she ends up forgetting.

The nail works just fine, though, so that's okay. Sayuri was a fundamentally lethargic woman.

She tried to beat off the dirt and mud that was caked all over the work clothes that were hung on the wall. The filth wouldn't come off, but she managed to get the leaves and spider webs that were stuck on. Well, that's good enough for now. She retrieved a cigarette pack and lighter from the pockets of her work clothes.

This season is swelteringly hot. Midsummer heat filled the cabin, causing beads of sweat to appear on Sayuri's skin. She was wearing just the shirt that was under her fatigues, and the pants that came as a set with those fatigues. If she took off any more layers she'd be in her underwear. A part of her actually wanted to do so, but it wouldn't do to expose such a slovenly side of herself in front of her daughter.

Wiping off sweat with the back of her hand, Sayuri looked over at the corner of the room. "What are you doing?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

Her daughter sat on the wooden floor, which didn't even have any carpeting laid out on it. She was Sayuri's daughter by blood, and they looked similar in many respects, including their faces. But to Sayuri, her daughter was a hard to understand being.

What the heck is going on in her head? she thought, while her daughter spaced out in front of the broken TV that sat in the corner of the room. There was no answer. Sayuri wasn't really expecting one, though, so she just lit a

cigarette and proceeded to smoke it.

Blowing out a puff of smoke, she started thinking about what to do for dinner.

Halfway up the mountain that surrounded a town on all sides, Sayuri and her daughter lived together in a cabin. This entire area of the mountain belonged to the town's richest family, the Kagamimoris, and the cabin was built for those who managed the area.

However, it was not originally meant for living in. Normally, the manager would have a house in town and only come up to use the cabin as a base of operations when he had business in the mountain. Sayuri was renting the cabin by paying the actual manager a small sum of money, and taking on various tasks normally carried out by said person.

By taking years to repair an old field that had been used by a family of farmers, she was eventually able to grow vegetables for the two of them to eat. Currently, she had a fair amount of vegetables stocked up, so she could just buy whatever she was missing from town. Sayuri would have no trouble surviving.

An entire day could pass with Sayuri just eating vegetables, tilling the field, and taking care of other errands. Those days would pass, one after the other, and eventually become a year. This would probably continue until she died.

Sayuri lived like a hermit, but she was satisfied with this lifestyle. For someone who'd already died once, it was fitting to live out their remaining years this way.

The only problem was her daughter, whom she couldn't possibly abandon in the middle of the mountain. At the bare minimum, she made sure to provide her daughter with meals, and to take care of her in other ways. That being said, doing so was not exactly Sayuri's strong point.

Sayuri was living in seclusion from the rest of the world for a variety of reasons, so she couldn't really remember what parents were supposed to be like. Also, she'd had almost no contact with civilization in her youth, so she had no friends or relatives to rely on. It would be great if someone would adopt her daughter, but that also couldn't happen due to some difficult circumstances—also, the girl's father had already made another family. He probably wanted to hurry and forget both Sayuri and her daughter.

Her daughter wasn't really a difficult child, and Sayuri ended up taking advantage of this. Basically she left her daughter on her own, although she would worry and nurse her back to health when she was sick, which was a rare occasion. That was also a form of love— Sayuri didn't hate her daughter, she just didn't have much interest.

The girl did come out of her own belly. But for some reason, the girl just didn't feel like her daughter, despite the time they'd spent living together, eating together, and even sleeping together.

"Sorry, that really was broken, wasn't it?" Finishing up the cigarette, Sayuri smothered the butt in the pot she used as an ashtray and put it out. There was a pottery studio on a nearby mountain that often threw out their failed products. Sayuri liked to bring home their discards to use around the house.

Also, sometimes someone would illegally dump their garbage nearby, too—the TV that her daughter was so enthusiastically staring at had been one of those things. The cabin had electricity, but nothing happened when you plugged the TV in, so it was probably broken. Her daughter had made a rare and passionate request for a TV, so she'd picked one up, but... Since it was thrown out, there's no way it would work, now that she thought about it. Sayuri regretted having picked up something so useless.

"I can go ask the electronics store to fix it the next time I go to town, or I could just buy a new one, if it's cheap enough. Which would you prefer?" Sayuri didn't have any interest in TV; one could even go so far as to say she found it unpleasant. But it was rare for her daughter to pester her for something, and if possible, she'd like to give one to her as a present.

Even though she was— at least on paper— her mother by blood, up until now she hadn't been able to give her daughter anything.

In the past, she'd felt like throwing up just from looking at the screen. But the smell of earth had sunk into her while she had been working on the farm, calming her mind and laying to rest her past weaknesses. Right now, she should be able to watch TV normally without feeling anything, as something that had nothing to do with her.

“Well, lugging that thing into town would be a pain, though,” Sayuri mused. “Since I picked it up after it was already thrown away, it’s probably useless to try and get it repaired, anyway. Maybe I should just throw that thing away again, and buy something better?”

■ECHO3■

“Mother.” Her daughter, who had been silent up until now, suddenly raised her voice. “Sorry, but please be quiet for a bit.” The daughter spoke formally, even to her mother.

It feels distant, Sayuri thought, but I wouldn’t be able to react if she suddenly called me ‘mom,’ anyway. I would just feel uncomfortable if she did that, so either way goes, really.

Being told ‘Please be quiet’ was a little unexpected, and left Sayuri unable to respond. Even as a child, her daughter hadn’t expressed her opinions very often. *Has she finally reached that ‘rebellious age’ I’ve heard about?* she wondered.

“I think it’s...making a sound?” While Sayuri was busy being a little moved, her daughter brought her face close to the TV. Pressing her cheek against the cold CRT TV screen, she put her ear against it.

“There shouldn’t be?” said Sayuri, feeling perplexed. “That TV is broken.” Sayuri walked over while lightly pounding her lower back— the daily farm work was getting to her. She was worried, because she thought that her daughter might be going strange in the head.

Squatting next to her, she focused her hearing: there was no sound. It was plugged in, and pressing the power button didn’t change anything— no program was being shown on the TV. It was completely dead. There wasn’t even any static.

“Mother, smoking isn’t good for you,” her daughter commented. “You know, health-wise.” The cigarette she’d been smoking earlier must have left a smell, because Sayuri’s daughter wrinkled her nose. Trying to apologize through her actions, she stroked her daughter’s head. Sayuri wasn’t concerned about her

health, but she really should stop smoking. In the worst case scenario she might end up causing a fire, and that would be terrible. But, old habits die hard.

“Hmmm...there was...a sound?” Imitating her daughter, Sayuri also pressed her ear against the TV. There shouldn’t be a sound, but she certainly did feel something.

“I can’t hear anything...what kind of sound is it?” she wondered out loud. What Sayuri felt was weird, like back when her daughter was still in her belly, before she’d showed any physical signs of being pregnant. It felt just like she did then. It would be nice if she could just chalk it up to some sort of hallucination.

“Hm?” Looking at the TV from up close, Sayuri felt that something was wrong. Sayuri and her daughter’s faces were reflected on the dead TV screen, which was subtly curved, so that their faces were warped like they were laughing.

“Perhaps, this...move away a bit.” Moving her daughter off to the side, Sayuri shook the TV. When she did that, some latch or clasp got disconnected, and the screen readily fell away, just like a fruit would peel.

“Whoops, it broke... No, wait, it was like this from the start.” There were signs of the TV having been forcibly pried open. Its innards had been taken out, and then the screen glued back on, like a lid. They’d probably removed the TV’s mechanical innards to sell, but even so, this was a rough job.

This TV had been thrown away, so it was easy to guess what had happened. Seeing even further proof that what she picked up wasn’t a TV, but just trash, was a real disappointment. No wonder she was able to carry it so easily all the way to the cabin— it was much lighter, with no innards.

The TV was hollow; like this, it was just a box. There’s no way anything would be shown on the screen...

“Hmmm... Maybe there is something...inside...” *It would be awful if it was a dead body*, Sayuri thought. During Sayuri’s youth, it was a popular urban legend that, in the dump, there was a refrigerator with a body hidden inside.

“What is it...” she wondered out loud. “A bird’s...egg?” Inside the TV there was a bird’s nest, with several eggs inside. Sayuri didn’t know much about the subject, so what kind of bird’s eggs they were wasn’t clear. For just a moment,

though, she thought *If these are edible it would save me the trouble of finding ingredients for dinner.* But if these eggs were hidden inside the TV the whole time, they were probably already dead and rotten.

Inside the oversized trash bin that was the TV, there was food waste; well, as a punchline, it wasn't very funny. The sound her daughter had heard was probably the nest, or its eggs, moving around randomly.

"Mother." In her arms, her daughter was holding the screen that Sayuri had just removed while calling out to her. The screen was covering her face, so it looked like the TV screen was talking rather than her daughter. *This girl sometimes does the strangest things,* Sayuri thought. *It was pretty creepy.*

"Those eggs," her daughter asked, "may I raise them?"

"No," Sayuri answered, "I think these are probably dead. But you can do what you like with them, I don't mind." After replying, Sayuri stood up, thinking, *Well, that was a waste of time.*

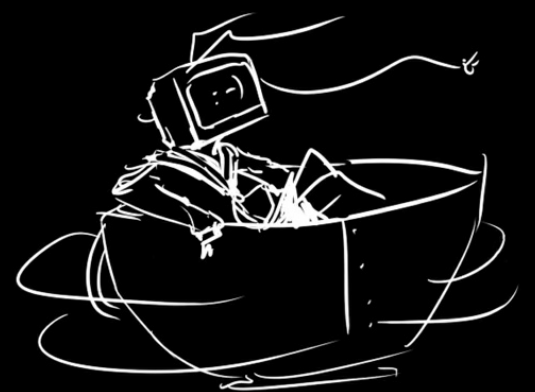
She headed for the kitchen, which was located in the back of the room. "I'm making dinner," she said. "What do you want to eat?"

"What do chicks eat?" her daughter asked.

"No," Sayuri told her, "I'm asking about you, though? They won't hatch that quickly. Actually, didn't I already tell you that those eggs are dead? Well, probably so, anyway... There's been cases of food poisoning going around, so I'm gonna make something hot."

"But mother, you always make mistakes with the strength of the fire and end up burning the food..." her daughter complained, before hesitating for a moment. "These eggs...they aren't edible, right?" she wanted to know. "It's okay to raise them, right?"

"It's fine, do as you like," Sayuri reassured her, still preoccupied with the problem of dinner. "Alright," she decided, "then I'll just make something random." *I managed to talk a lot with my daughter today,* Sayuri thought happily. With that, she completely forgot about the TV, as well as the eggs that were inside it.





Chapter 2

A home shopping channel that sells
everything but a good night's sleep

■CHANNEL14■

I wonder: since when did I stop placing my expectations on things? It would be easy if I could just chalk it up to, 'I was born with this personality.' Of course, genetics is a factor, but a person's personality is also made by their environment and how they were raised.

Well, it's probably not all exterior factors. For example, if I was born into a rich family like Utena was. Or if I was at the wrong end of some intense bullying like Torii is. Or, like Kurashima, if I was born in the city— no, as a boy. As expected, my personality would be changed accordingly.

But, well, one can't change themselves as if they were changing channels on a TV. If there's anything someone didn't like about themselves, the only recourse would be to change that slowly over time.

Although, the only thing I can do is live as myself.

"Aaaah," I sighed. I couldn't help but think about it.

I jogged over to the suspicious-looking mascot. As I got closer, my thoughts kept going off on tangents. The human mind can't bear extended monotonous work. A brain with too much free time will start thinking about meaningless things, much like seeing a dream.

"Aaahhhh—" I heaved another sigh. Since when, I wonder? Since when was it that I stopped living, even though I'm alive? That I started to just accept my situation and let events flow past me? That I became just a face in the masses, only eating what was fed to me, like a baby chick.

I feel like I had been different in the past. Every day was fun, and there were so many things I wanted to do that 24 hours in a day just wasn't enough. When the entire world was unknown to me, and it felt like an amusement park. The world was fun, and I was running about, engrossed in it.

Where should I go tomorrow, and what should I play? It was a fact that tomorrow would be way better than today, and those days piled on one after the other, making life shine. I was free, and filled to overflowing with hopes and dreams. Enough that I had no time to watch something like TV.

Although every once in a while I was asked to mind the shop, making me sulk. And while I was making a sour face at the store counter, at some point *he'd* be standing out front... And with a smile, while waving his hand lightly, he'd pull me out into an even more sparkling world.

Afterwards, I'd always be harshly scolded for abandoning the store. I wasn't sorry at all though.

I had just been happy to laugh together with him, going, *Today was fun too, wasn't it?*

"....." It wasn't very far away, so I reached the mascot character quickly. Even up close, the design was weird. It was hard to tell from far away, but it seemed this mascot was supposed to be a panda. No, the color seemed to have been sucked out of it. It was a strange mascot made up of white and black.

It was the definition of suspicious, so while making sure I could run away at any time, I inspected the mascot from up close. It looked like he was beckoning to me with his hand, and those movements seemed nostalgic to me, somehow. So I ended up running over at full speed, although it wasn't like me.

"Yo, Snail," the mascot said in a muffled voice.

Rather than being surprised, I thought, *Oh, of course*. Somehow, I could tell. I was always stuck at the store, so I was a "snail." Nowadays there's no one who would call me by that nickname, though.

"What the heck are you doing, Kousuke?" Unusually for me, I spoke casually from the beginning. Even if I talked formally to this guy, he'd probably just be creeped out. What an obnoxious guy.

"Thank god you noticed," he said. "I was thinking it would be hard to call just you over. And if that was the case, then forcefully taking you away by hand would be my only choice... But you remembered the secret sign." The mascot awkwardly made a strange sign using both of its hands. It looked like the mascot was just waving its hands, but from the shape of those hands it was apparently trying to send a message.

As I stood dumbfounded, I started feeling a little sorry.

"No, actually I forgot..." I admitted. "But that really is nostalgic, isn't it? While

I was stuck behind the counter, you'd pretend to be a pedestrian and send me hand signs. This was 'Let's play.' This was 'Meet up in the secret base later.' This was 'When can we play?'" I also started to mimic our old hand signs. All of them had to do with going out to play, but that had just been a sign of our age. Like Kousuke's grandfather— his ancestors had been military men, or something similar— we had used hand signs (which we modified from the ones written down in a book we found) to communicate. At least, I think they were. It might all just be something Kousuke made up.

Alternating, we exchanged hand signs, though we were no longer the proper age to enjoy such things.

Starting to feel depressed, I stopped signing and started speaking normally. "What the heck are you even doing? I'd heard that you were also in this alternate dimension— no, this amusement park. But why in a mascot costume? Are you an idiot?"

"I'm not an idiot," he objected, "I'm a hero. You, I'll show you something good, so come with me for a bit. This way, this way♪"

"A hero?" I questioned. "You're still saying that stuff?"

Kousuke admired people like his military ancestors, or Tokusatsu heroes that were being broadcast in the early morning on TV. When we were small children, we would wave around sticks and play in a secret base we made in the mountains. But we're already in high school.

Being pulled along by my hand, I had no choice but to follow along with him. In the past I was taller than Kousuke, so I could push him around, but now I can no longer measure up to his strength. Turning around, I saw in the distance that Torii was nestling up to Utena, who was starting to droop over in her sleep.

She probably doesn't have any interest in what's going on here, as she's not even looking this way. If it's just for a little while, I should be able to leave without any problems. Hrmm— but that's a little heartless.

They're rare and precious people that I was actually able to talk to, that I was able to meet, in this baffling place. We should be going around together, so I felt a little guilty leaving them like this.

“Wait,” I said. “We should take Torii and Utena along with us.”

“It’s fine,” Kousuke reassured me. “I won’t take up that much of your time. Just come along, Snail.”

“Don’t call me ‘Snail,’” I objected, “we’re already in high school.”

“But you really are slow,” he teased. “exactly like a snail... So then what, do you want me to call you ‘Denkiya-san?’ You wouldn’t like that either, right? What about ‘Hitomi-chan?’” Kousuke was still pulling me along as he replied to me without much thought. “It’ll be fine, don’t worry. Just leave it to me, Sn...Hitomi. I’ll save you.”

“I don’t get it. Are you trying to pretend that you’re still a kid?” I continued to be dragged along as I muttered complaints. I’m being swept along again, though I could resist with all my might if I felt like it. I just don’t really have that kind of willpower.

Since when was it that I started just letting myself be swept along like this?

Kousuke got caught up in his parent’s circumstances... He ended up as Utena’s flunky, and our happy friendship was cut off. Our bond had been torn apart.

Even though I waited for him in my store. My childhood friend, who would have come to take me out into the sparkling radiance, never came at all. I was left sitting behind the counter, with my chin resting in my hands and staring out of the storefront, while feeling empty and lifeless. Eventually, I started to ignore the storefront and stared at the TVs decorating the place instead.

Putting everything behind me, I stopped holding any hopes or expectations in anything.

This childhood friend of mine— where in the world could he be trying to lead me now, after being gone for so long?

■CHANNEL15■

Just as I thought, I wasn’t really expecting anything out of this.

“Because of the earlier fire, I’m covered head to toe in soot. I’d really like to

take a shower..." As soon as I muttered this to myself, though, Kousuke led me to a place that seemed like it had just what I wanted.

Actually, how did he even find this place? He's always been rather sharp-eyed, but... Apparently, Kousuke had explored every nook and cranny of this amusement park and now had a firm grasp of its entire geography.

This place was right under the merry-go-round, where I ran across that bizarre TV girl. I was slightly wary of being back here, but the TV girl seems to have disappeared. The horses with their heads torn off were also stopped for some reason. It might be closing time.

We move through a gap in the ominous, carcass-like horses towards the back. Moving aside an object that looked like an enshrined wedding cake, Kousuke revealed a ladder that led underground.

Really, I wondered, *how the heck did he find this?* It was placed so that you wouldn't notice it unless you knew there was an underground room in the area.

The room appeared to be something like a guard's room or security station, placed in such a way that park goers would not be able to get in. Kousuke called it a "control room." In the confined space, a countless number of monitors were lined up. And behind that was a small door, through which was a barebones shower.

Compared to the surface— the amusement park— this room had basically no decorations at all. It was a drab place. In any case, I was just happy to be able to take a shower, and I devoted myself to diligently cleaning off all the dirt on me.

The water turned black enough to surprise even me, although only a little.

"I feel so refreshed." I used the soap that Kousuke gave me to clean both my body and my hair. Cracking open the door, I call out to Kousuke, who was sitting on the floor of the control room. "Hey, is there a towel or something?"

"I left it over there," he replied. I have no idea what Kousuke is so embarrassed about, but he refused to look this way. He was sitting down with his eyes closed, like he was a monk in training, or something. It kind of made me want to prank him, but I don't really have the composure in my heart to do that in this place. So for now, I just wiped my body off with the towel. I felt warm all

over, and actually had a bit of steam rising off me still.

I was just as dirty as when I was a child, and the two of us would run around playing, until we were both covered in mud. I remember when we used to get into the bath together, but we're too old now. My breasts have grown a little, and I could even get pregnant now. It was a tough age to be fostering friendship between the sexes.

"Is there a change of clothes?" I call out.

"No," he replied. "Besides, I don't even know what size you wear. But that towel was something I took from the gift shop, so you can go rummage around there for something later."

"Hmm... Then for now, I'll just put my uniform back on," I decided. "Thanks, Kousuke." I ended up really being helped by him.

Now that I think about it, it feels like it's been several years since we've talked like this. That's why I ended up acting a little distant; it probably wouldn't be good to keep getting spoiled by him.

Obediently, I put on my uniform, and after some debate I ended up putting my apron and bandana back on, too. I definitely don't need the apron and bandana, but they're some of the precious few things I managed to bring in with me from the real world and my daily life, so I found it hard to throw them away.

If I dress like I'm working, then I feel like I can act like an employee instead of like regular old Denkiya Hitomi. It'll help me to not get involved with others more than necessary. This is like my armor and helmet. Until I can accurately grasp the distance I should put between myself and Kousuke and the others, I want to be just an employee of an electronics store.

"I'm feeling pretty refreshed... Later, let's let Torii and Utena use this shower, too. The both of them also got caught in the fire and are covered in soot."

"I don't think this is the time for caring about your appearances, though," Kousuke argued. "Women really are nothing but trouble, they're so slow... In that sense, Hitomi, you've really become a 'girl' now, haven't you?"

"I've been a girl from the very beginning," I said. "Kousuke, why don't you

take a shower, too? That costume must be really hot inside. You're dripping with sweat, aren't you?"

"Don't need one," he scoffed. "It's annoying."

"Actually, why *are* you wearing a mascot costume?" I wondered.

"I was thinking it would be bad to get caught by a park employee," he explained. "This way, no one will think I'm suspicious, even if I just wander around. Anyway, I hate that you're looking down at me, so take a seat already."

After being prompted, I popped a squat next to Kousuke. He had already taken off the costume, and it was flung haphazardly all over the room. Finally, I saw his face up close for the first time in years. Kurashima was a man of effeminate features, but Kousuke felt like a normal guy: he had short hair, which was trimmed neatly, and he had solid muscle and bone structure, like a hunting dog. He was wearing the familiar male uniform, but he had taken off his jacket and, for some reason, had it wrapped around his waist like a mantle.

Kousuke was just a little shorter than Kurashima was, but he looked heavier because of his muscles and so on, although there's not really any point in comparing the two... The men in our town tended to have well-arranged looks, brimming with a wild feel. That's why Utena had him wait on her, like she was showing him off.

I've known him since he was little enough to be sleeping and drooling with his belly button out, though. So while I do feel academic curiosity as to how that image could grow to be Kousuke as he is now, he doesn't make my heart beat. It's kind of unclear right now, but he's something like family to me.

I must have been acting solemn, because Kousuke started glaring at me, annoyed. "Hey, stop staring so much," he said. "You reek of soap, keep your face away from me."

"Soap doesn't reek," I protested. "Anyway, sorry. I was just thinking, 'Oh, this is what you look like,' because it's been a while. Is there a dryer here? My hair is still damp and it feels gross."

"I have no clue, I'm not gonna go that far for you," he retorted. "There might be one if you look around, though."

“Sorry,” I apologized, “I made you wait because I wanted a shower. I didn’t want to get out because then I’d have to go back to the weirdness of the park... So I kind of figured I’d just stay in a little longer.”

“It’s fine, girls take too long no matter what they do. I know, Kagamimori was also like that, too.”

“You call Kagamimori by her last name?” I asked curiously. “I thought you were closer than that.”

“We’re not close, not really...do you mind if I smoke?” he asked. After talking at length about stuff both meaningless and somehow important, Kousuke suddenly let a bombshell slip. I was surprised: we’re both 16, an age where we’re not allowed to smoke by law.

While I was reeling from the shock, Kousuke took out a cigarette pack from his uniform pocket. Taking out a cigarette like it was a precious treasure, he lit it with a practiced motion, and smoke hung about in the cramped underground room.

■CHANNEL16■

“You’re awful~...” I complained with a playful grimace. “Ahh, Kousuke, so you’ve become a rebel, have you?”

“I’ve got stress, you know?” he excused himself. “It piles up. You know Kagamimori, she’s so selfish— nicotine’s my only friend. You stopped playing with me, after all.”

“No no, you’re the one who stopped coming over to the store,” I protested.

“It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to get more cigs while we’re here, huh?” he observed. “I guess I’ll just have to use these wisely. Aahh, there’s only 10 left already. The gift store doesn’t carry any of this stuff.”

While we were talking, Kousuke started to hold his cigarette in a way that screamed, “I am cool, look at me.” He was definitely trying to show off.

The fire at the tip of the cigarette in his mouth burned slowly. My dad was a smoker too, so I was used to this. Mom didn’t smoke, though, so whenever dad

would try to smoke she'd get mad enough that her face looked like a demon's... I actually kind of felt sorry for him. I kind of felt like what he was doing wasn't *that* bad.

The rules enforcement at our school is lax, so sometimes you see students sitting around smoking while still wearing their uniforms. You'd often see butts lying around on the roof and in the restrooms.

Even so, to think Kousuke smoked... Somehow, I'm actually a little surprised that I'm so shocked. Sighing, I tried my hardest to put on a face that said, 'This isn't really all that unpleasant' before attempting to shift the topic: "We ended up leaving Torii and Utena all alone back there. And they probably want a shower too, so can I go call them over? Actually, why did you bring only me here?"

"Because you're my friend," he explained. "I thought I'd let you into my secret base, this control room, as a special treat. Besides, I wanted to brag about it to someone. It's great, isn't it?"

"That part of you never changes, does it Kousuke? Friends... It's been years since we've even spoken to each other," I observed. "At this point, wouldn't it be closer to say that Kagamimori-san and the others are your friends?"

"But they wouldn't have any interest in a secret base, would they? And Kagamimori would only get mad if I went off and did things on my own... And for some reason, Hitomi, you happened to be there at just the right time, so I thought I'd show it off to you."

"That's it?" I asked incredulously. "I was wondering what it would be, but you're just posing to look cool."

"That's it?'..." he complained. "Show some emotions, man. What a bore."

"So basically, uh, this is where we were going?" I asked awkwardly. "I thought we were just stopping by because I said I wanted a shower."

"Yeah, what I wanted to show you was this control room," he huffed. "I thought you'd be more like, 'This is awesome!' and get all excited, you know? Like old times."

"You know we're not children anymore?" I asked. While we were making

meaningless conversation, Kousuke beckoned me over. Walking to him, I looked at what he was pointing to: Torii and Utena were being shown on one of the countless monitors in the control room. Utena was still hunched over, sleeping on the bench as she'd been when I left her. And beside her, Torii, who was standing like a possessing ghost. It seemed like Torii might be worried that I hadn't come back yet, because she would occasionally stare off into the distance.

"What's this," I asked curiously, "a security camera?"

"Something like that, I think," he told me. "Control rooms like this one are actually under a fair number of these attractions: we can use this to keep watch over the entire park without having to walk around. Although, I'm not sure how much we can trust these feeds." Now that I think about it, Kousuke hadn't been back once since he split off, saying he'd go look around outside— so, it was because he'd found these control rooms.

Kousuke opened up what looked to be a handmade map, and started writing something down. "This park— it changes appearances at the drop of a hat, so a map is basically meaningless," Kousuke said, while sitting cross-legged on the floor and pointing to stuff on his map.

"I've found several points here that look like exits..." he continued. "I think you'd call them admission gates, you know, like a reception desk? But I haven't made sure yet that if you leave through them you'd actually get 'outside' of this alternate dimension, so I don't know if we can escape yet. But still, if we can leave, then wouldn't you like to try?"

"Well, yeah..." I said. "I really do want to hurry up and get home." I was happy, thinking that we'd rather unexpectedly be able to escape this alternate dimension without any trouble. Well, even if we leave through what looks like the exit of this amusement park, there might just be an even more bizarre space on the other side.

Feeling a little more at ease, I sat down on the floor. I was crouching so that I could run away at any time, but my legs had gotten tired. It seemed like Kousuke was still, at his roots, the childhood friend I knew, after all— although I was still trying to be at least a little cautious. But as of the moment, I don't feel

like I'm in any danger.

"Let's go together, Kousuke," I suggested. "Along with Torii-san and Kagamimori-san... Oh, there was one more guy, wasn't there? You know him, don't you? Kurashima-san. Let's all leave together."

"I still have a little something to do here," he told me abruptly. "If you guys want to escape, you should go ahead of me."

"Whaaaat~, you should come with us... What is it that you have to do?" Feeling lonely, I pull on the sleeve of Kousuke's uniform.

"You—you're not a kid anymore, you know?..." he asked, clearly annoyed by my cutesy attitude. "If possible, I'd want you to hurry up and get out of here, though." Grinding the finished cigarette butt into the floor to put it out, Kousuke's mouth bent into a lopsided frown.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to experience a weird place like this again, so I really want to enjoy this place as much as possible. I just didn't want to drag you along with me." Making a face like a scolded child, Kousuke muttered that to himself.

■CHANNEL17■

Although it's a bit late, for now we decide to share our information.

Why, and how, is Kousuke in this strange alternate dimension with the face of an amusement park? I wanted to figure out the details of this event, as well as what his goals were for being here. If possible, I wanted to help. The fact that he was my childhood friend was part of the r—well, I didn't really care about that sort of thing anymore.

Just leaving like this, well, I'm not really happy with that, although Kousuke wouldn't stop telling me to escape before the park changes (or, in other words, before his map becomes useless). Even I think it would be smarter to do that. Well, at least a little. But I don't think I'd be able to stomach leaving him behind.

Kousuke's trying to force me to do what he says without telling me anything important. *Stop being so pretentious. We're the same age, even though you were such a crybaby when we were younger!* That's what I was thinking.

Basically, I might as well have just been sulking.

“You’re so annoying sometimes...” he sighed, “not to mention that you’re still just as slow as always, Snail. Fine, fine. I’ll tell you. I know I can’t win against you in an argument.” Kousuke gave up before long, and started talking as he gazed over the lined up monitors on the wall.

“That being said,” he continued, “I don’t really understand this situation, either. I have no idea why or how I wandered into this bizarre place. Well, I have my guesses,” he amended, “but no proof.”

I nodded. And, thinking that it was my turn to share, I started explaining my side of things, although he didn’t ask. That I was working at the store, and that before I knew it I was in this park... And from there, everything I saw, everyone I met, and everything that I experienced.

Once again, now that I’m remembering, I really have just been getting continuously swept up and carried along. I didn’t really have any useful information in the end, though. Kousuke started laughing for some reason, and I felt a little offended.

“What?” I demanded. “What’s so funny, Kousuke?”

“No,” he choked out, “I just found it funny how you didn’t panic. That’s not cute at all. You know what Kagamimori was like? She screamed, and ran around, and fainted up a storm. Even Torii-san was more talkative than usual. And I wasn’t able to think properly about anything at first.”

“You three all came into this dimension together?” I wanted to know. That’s what it sounded like, although I did hear that he was together with Utena and Torii.

That reminds me: Kousuke, Torii, and Utena were all usually together at school, too. They’re all connected to each other. In fact, here the outsiders are only Kurashima and I.

Well, I do have a vague past connection with Kousuke, but right now we’re rather estranged. It’s enough to feel strange that we’re together now. Kurashima was floating even further outside this circle, although I didn’t really care too much about him.

I wonder, what is up with this lineup? How did— or rather what are— the conditions for people to be chosen to wander inside of this place? We come from a small town, but the population is still fairly high. Why was it just us? Well, there might still be other people around that we just haven't found, though.

"No, I don't think there are any. I can't say for sure, but I can tell from searching through all these monitors. Other than us, everyone else seems to just be part of the faceless mob of customers." Kousuke, looking like he had great interest in the subject, spoke as he pondered it. "I tried talking to those people several times, but...I get no reply. And it doesn't seem like you can touch them, either; your hand just goes right through. They're something like an illusion, or they're not live people, at any rate. It's like what you see in those RPGs, what do you call them, background?"

"You're still playing video games?" I commented. Feeling lonely, I pull on the sleeve of Kousuke's uniform.

"That's because the selection in your store is terrible," he told me.

While mixing in some unrelated conversation, I'm starting to gain some understanding: It looks like Kousuke realized the existence of these control rooms rather promptly, and then moved to use them. Since that time, he's been constantly watching the monitors, and hasn't seen any people other than us—that is, people with personalities that you can talk to. If that's the case, then the possibility of there being any other people that have wandered in here is probably exceedingly low.

That is, if you trust Kousuke's words unconditionally. He's also been speaking like he has something stuck in the back of his teeth, so I feel like he's still hiding something important.

Kousuke realized that I was looking at him full of doubt, and he let out a bitter laugh. "Stop making that scary face," he said, "people will think you're ugly. For now, the real problem is why we wandered in here in the first place. If we can make that clear, then we should be able to figure out how to escape...maybe."

"Didn't you want to stay here?" I asked.

"I'm gonna leave eventually. I can't just live here forever." Kousuke said,

before complaining that they don't sell tobacco here.

"By the way," he continued, "you've got it wrong. It's not like we wandered into this alternate dimension together. I don't know about Torii-san and Kagamimori, but I was moving separately from them." While I felt it was a bit late, he started talking about the details of how he came to wander into this amusement park: "You probably already know, but you see, I...was getting worked to the bone being treated like a servant. So today, too— is it still today? Anyway, I was being forced to go along with her on a shopping trip. You know, to carry bags. At that point, Torii-san wasn't there."

"So you were on a date with Kagamimori-san?"

"It wasn't a date," he objected, "I was carrying her bags while she shopped. It happens a lot, getting called out to do things even though it should have been a day off. I'd have to carry her bags, make sure she was happy, eat, and then I'd be sent home."

Isn't that just a date? I thought. *Well, whatever, it doesn't really matter.* I'm not really happy about it, but I already knew that Utena had a hold on a large part of Kousuke's life. 'You're working hard even though it's your day off, thanks' is about the only impression I had.

"But there's not really any place to go shopping in our town, is there?" I remarked.

"There isn't, yeah. That's why we have to take the train and go a ways away. Whenever Kagamimori has something she wants to buy, she makes me research stores and stuff. It's so tiring," he groaned, "I wish I was at least being paid."

"You're putting in the labor so that your parents can continue to receive their salaries, aren't you?" I said. "It's a bit roundabout, but you *are* getting paid. With like your allowance and stuff, right?"

"That's right, but...Kagamimori...that girl doesn't do anything herself. If she doesn't remember where the shop is and we get even a little lost her face goes red and she gets mad immediately. She also gets tired really fast, and always rests as soon as that happens. It's really a lot of work, it kind of feels like babysitting." Letting out a very deep sigh, Kousuke lit another cigarette.

This underground room is airtight, so it's gotten quite smoky inside. My sight is being dyed faintly white. Coughing reflexively, I shook my head and asked: "Kousuke, what did Utena-san even buy?"

"Ahh, umm..." he hazarded. "Sorry, I made a promise not to tell."

"I'll keep it a secret, I swear," I promised.

"Yeah, but... Look, I know you're not the type to go around blabbing secrets, but there really are some complicated circumstances surrounding this, so it really is impossible for me to tell you. It really is nothing important though— it's also got nothing to do with what's going on now, too."

I don't really understand. But, well, I don't have the right to make him talk if he doesn't want to. Even though we shared everything when we were younger.

Hmm... He *did* invite me, only, into this control room and told me so much of what he found out...just for that, I really am grateful. This is probably something like special treatment from Kousuke, although we're only childhood friends who used to be really close.

If we were family, there probably would be no secrets between us. Even if we were raised like siblings, in the end there are no bonds of blood between us.

"Anyway," he continued, "we ended up buying a lot of stuff...and we returned to town by train. What she bought was, you know, *that*— so it wasn't possible to go straight to her mansion. Instead, we went through a different route than usual.

I have no idea what their 'usual route' is though, I thought. Kousuke must think that I know everything he knows, because he's leaving out a lot of small details. It *is* true that in the past we knew what each other was thinking even without saying anything.

■CHANNEL18■

Starting to feel somewhat miserable, I focused on keeping quiet and listening to what Kousuke was saying.

"And then," he was saying, "you see, that's when Kurashima came up and

asked us for directions.”

So that’s where you walk into the picture, Kurashima, I thought. That guy is so suspicious, basically because he’s a completely unknown entity from our town’s perspective.

Kousuke snorted; it seemed like he also couldn’t stand the guy. “He says he’s touring the country on his bike. I have no idea why he’d come to such a remote town as ours, though. It’s a hard place to get into, and a bike would conversely make it even more inconvenient.”

“There was probably just something that he wanted to see, I guess,” I said. “Either that, or he just got lost.”

“Yeah, he might have been lost, now that I think about it. He *did* come and ask us for directions— but no, he also seemed like he was looking for something... I really can’t tell. I didn’t talk to him much, either.” Pursing his lips, Kousuke started to tap his foot; he was clearly frustrated.

“That Kagamimori,” he grumbled, “she probably fell in love with him at first sight... That girl is really easy like that, apparently.” So then, Kagamimori decided to personally guide Kurashima around. After all, she’d have nothing to do once she returned home, anyway. “But I wanted to stop carrying all those bags,” Kousuke was saying, “so in the end, we split up there and I headed for the storehouse in the mountain.”

“Storehouse? In the mountain?” I asked, latching on to this small detail.

Kousuke explained it vaguely: “The Kagamimoris have a storehouse in the mountains. I say ‘storehouse,’ but it’s more like a mountain cabin... So we’ve started leaving the stuff we buy up there. Apparently that girl is going shopping without telling her parents,” he sighed, “so the storehouse is where she secretly hides the stuff she’s bought.” It sounded like a complaint, but he moved on: “I mean, the mountains surrounding the town are all owned by the Kagamimori group, so it looks like Kagamimori owns that storehouse, too. Apparently there was a time when Kagamimori looked through a bunch of her family’s albums and old records in their house’s storeroom and stuff. She occasionally finds stuff that’s convenient for us to use, so we just go ahead and use them as we please.”

“Is that so?” I mused. “So, in other words, you also know about such a secret space— one that sounds especially important to Kagamimori.”

“It’s not like I could help it,” Kousuke objected. “That Kagamimori buys so much stuff at once that there’s no way she could carry it all herself— not that she would, anyway. I also don’t want to have to climb mountains carrying her shopping, but, well, she completely has it in her head that I won’t betray her... I’ve been acting like her humble servant this entire time for that, after all.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I teased. “Thanks for the hard work, servant boy.” The heat that I’d gained from the shower is all gone now; my body has gotten chilly. How climate works in this strange alternate dimension is unclear, but it seems that it’s getting close to winter. If the sun keeps setting and it keeps getting colder, I can see me catching a cold.

I sneezed, but I don’t think Kousuke caught that because he continued talking: “And that’s how I ended up separating from Kagamimori. She probably went with Kurashima, guiding him wherever he wanted to go.” This time, Kousuke did seem to notice me sniffing, because he started acting worried. “You alright?” he asked. “You’re not really on the tough side, so be careful.”

“The unhealthy person who smokes shouldn’t be talking,” I retorted. “I’m fine, just feeling a little chilly after that shower... Anyway, I have a question.” It was kind of embarrassing to have him worry about me like this, so I changed the subject. “So Torii-san wasn’t with you guys today? It feels like she’s always hanging around you, though— at least at school, anyway. Oh, but it’s not like you guys are particularly close or anything, right?”

“Well... That Kagamimori, it looks like she hates Torii-san, after all.” He spoke like it was somebody else’s problem, even though he overlooked all the bullying going on against her while Utena was around. It’s like he chose to let her die— well, I’m the same, though.

Distance doesn’t matter. While knowing that there was a poor girl being bullied, we didn’t even think of helping her. We’re both guilty, but Kousuke does have his position to consider: nobody can defy the princess of this town.

Succumbing to this feeling of helplessness, I asked a rather useless question: “Why is Torii-san even being bullied, I wonder?” There probably isn’t any reason

for the bullying. At best, it's probably something like she's gloomy or dirty or creepy... There just needs to be a small excuse for people to start hurting other people; the weakest one in the group will be the one to get harassed.

In any group. It's probably the same in adult society, too. People live in groups, so it's inevitable. There's no choice but to behave so as to not get involved and expose your own weaknesses, in order to live.

Kousuke probably didn't want to talk about this subject either— his tone was vague when he said, "It's probably like that saying: 'excessive cuteness multiplies hatred hundredfold...' No, that's wrong, it's because Torii-san has everything that Kagamimori lacks, so she hates her."

What does that even mean? I wonder. Utena is this town's princess; a young lady from a rich family. There's probably nothing in this world she couldn't have, and he's saying that Torii has what she doesn't? I wonder what it is, but I can't imagine it. Maybe it's her height or something? Utena *is* small.

"Well anyway," said Kousuke, "I was planning on meeting up with Kagamimori after I dropped off her stuff, because I was gonna get her to treat me to some good food as a reward." Just like that, Kousuke went back to the previous topic, so I couldn't pursue my train of thought.

It's a difficult topic to talk and to ask about, anyway. But somehow, I'm really curious about it, although it has nothing to do with the larger goal of escaping this alternate dimension. I'm probably just curious about Torii because I can sense a juicy story.

"We had a meeting point," he was saying, "so I left the mountain and headed to where Kagamimori should have been waiting. You know there's that temple, right? A small one, near your house."

"Oh, that's not a temple, it's a shrine," I corrected him. "But no one's managing it any more, so it's basically a ruin. Delinquents use it as their hangout, so I wish they'd demolish it already. But we played there often when we were little... It'd be kind of lonely to have that place be gone."

When I started talking about something else, Kousuke made a scary face. He was staring fixedly at me.

“W-what?” I stammered. “Kousuke...?”

“Sorry— Uhh, it must be my mistake.” Kousuke made a weird face, like he swallowed something that wasn’t quite chewed enough.

“That temple— shrine, I mean— it burned down. There was a fire; location wise, your store was in danger, too. I was really worried.” He asked me if I was ok.

I was bewildered. Certainly, that shrine was located just behind my house. If there was a fire, my house would be in danger, too. But if there really was a fire, there’s no way I would miss it.

But I had been nodding off, because I was so bored while minding the store... That’s why for a while, in the beginning, I thought this was all a dream. I don’t remember the moment I wandered into an alternate dimension. There’s a possibility that I was sleeping, so I didn’t notice the fire.

“I was also worried about Kagamimori, because she was supposed to be waiting at the shrine,” he said slowly. “She’s a slow runner, so I thought I would need to save her... After calling the fire department, I ran around and went into the shrine from where the fire was weakest. Now that I think about it, that was really dangerous, though.”

Certainly, it would be; if you’re not wearing any fire fighting equipment, entering a fire is basically suicide. You’d probably just pass out from the smoke before burning to death.

“I was just running around in the smoke without much thought... I passed out, and the next thing I knew I was here in this alternate dimension. That’s why I really thought this place was like heaven, or hell.” That idea wasn’t completely impossible, and the thought gave me the chills.

Kousuke tried to do something unreasonable, and fainted either from suffocating in the smoke or breathing in noxious gas before being burned to death. Meanwhile, I was sleeping without a care when I was caught in the fire and died.

That *might* be the case.

Although, the fact that either heaven or hell is set in an amusement park

doesn't mesh well with my knowledge... No one knows for sure what happens after death, because there's no living person that's ever actually experienced death.

I'm starting to wonder if this *is* life after death, instead of an alternate world out of some fantasy novel. If that's the case, I doubt that we can escape at all.

■CHANNEL19■

"Hey," said Kousuke, sounding alarmed.

Like sparks flashing and flickering in the back of my head, I felt something more like unease than the chills, causing me to shudder.

Seeing that, Kousuke had suddenly pulled on my apron. He used to do the same thing when we were kids. Kousuke, who was still sitting, had to look at me with upturned eyes because I was standing stock still.

I can't go against those eyes. "What?" I asked him. "Sorry, I spaced out... Anyway, I'm not really sure about what you were talking about earlier. Or rather, I feel like there's some info missing."

"You're the type to keep talking instead of listening to what other people say, aren't you?" Kousuke said disagreeably, while gesturing at the countless monitors in front with his jaw.

Following his prompt, I looked at the monitors, and was struck dumb: there was something strange on the video feed.

These monitors were most likely displaying feeds from security cameras, which were placed all over this mysterious amusement park in an alternate dimension. One of those feeds had some slight noise running through it, its image showing something just slightly out of focus compared to the other feeds.

It was the face of a girl, but huge. No—the camera is just so close to her face that she's breathing on it. It's a hardcore close-up. I know that face; it's Utena, who was asleep just a while ago.

Her face is so close, I can tell that she has cracked and dry skin that she must

have been constantly hiding with makeup. It's probably a problem with the angle of the shot, but her eyes looked like they were bulging out. Like this, it looks like Utena is trapped in the TV and she's trying desperately to get out. Her palms were repeatedly slapping the TV screen.

"Utena-san." Like a small child, I said the name of what I saw out loud, tilting my head slightly.

It looks like Utena is waving her hands at the camera. She's noticed the security camera, well, probably a security camera, and is approaching it. That's what I thought, but apparently I was wrong. She was looking off in a different direction, with a huge smile.

"So Kagamimori-san woke up. Do you know where she is?"

"I don't know everything, Snail," he said sullenly.

Putting my hand on the shoulder of this childhood friend of mine who won't stop using that nickname I hate, I focus on the monitors. It's so zoomed in that I can't really tell what's happening; this cameraman is awful. It looks like Utena is energetically shouting something, but there's no audio. "Does this thing have sound?" I asked.

"Wait a minute," he said. I was grinding the back of my hand into the whorl of hair on the back of his head, making it hard for Kousuke to refuse, just like how I can do nothing but surrender if I'm grabbed by the apron.

Those are our instincts, fostered since we were children, playing around every day until we were covered in mud. That fact that his still exists makes me extremely happy, somehow. I couldn't stop myself from grinning broadly. Seeing this, Kousuke looked up at me, crept out, before taking something out of his pocket. It was a red-copper colored rhinoceros beetle the size of his palm.

"Kya—!" I'm not really good with bugs. They're filthy and creepy and you have no idea where they've been, or where they came from. No girl would be friends with bugs. I fell backwards onto my butt, and continued to try and scoot as far away from it as possible.

"Hahaha," Kousuke laughed. The way I reacted must have been hilarious, but his laughter made me mad. And then, he showed off the bug in his hand— no it

only looked like one.

The room was really dim, so I thought it was a bug, but apparently it was just a portable terminal. He had something that was a pretty rare sight in our declining town— a brand new smartphone.

Hmm. It really *is* like a bug, though. The smartphone had creepily moving jointed legs growing out the side of it. It moved creepily, like a centipede. On the back of it, there was also something clear— it had insect wings growing out of it. I don't know how a smartphone is doing this; not just the screen, but the entire body is glowing blue-white, like a backlit screen.

“W-what the heck is that, Kousuke?” I demanded. “A smartphone? A bug?”

“You're being way too scared. This thing is pretty handy, you know.” While pointing at me and poking fun, Kousuke also used the hand gripping the smartbug (or so I've named it) to stroke its belly. He was operating it.

Deriving a small amount of relief from this casual and familiar gesture, I scooted closer to him, across the floor. I peeked at the screen over his shoulder.

The stomach of the smartbug was a rounded, liquid crystal screen, and countless icons were lined up on it. It was like looking at a bug's innards, and it made me feel a little sick.

Every time Kousuke tapped or flicked the smartbug, it cried out a really terrible bug sound that hurt my ears. As I thought, it looks like a machine but it's a living thing. It's a bug.

While I was watching him play with his smartbug, unable to speak, Kousuke talked about it proudly. “It was always flying around right next to me, this bug. And by always, I mean since I wandered into this alternate dimension. It was depressing me, so was thinking about smushing it dead. But look, doesn't it seem like a smartphone?”

The smartbug is getting closer and closer to my face. I was so creeped out, I had to hold my mouth to stop from screaming. Seeing that, Kousuke made a laugh that sounded a lot like the sounds the smartbug was making.

Oh, when did his voice break? It's a bit late, but I couldn't help but notice. It's a matter of course that he's changed from the Kousuke I knew. Or wait, his

throat might just be damaged from all of the tobacco.

“I was thinking it must have some sort of function,” Kousuke explained, “So I caught it and tried playing around with it. It’s got something like a map app, and that’s how I found this control room.”

“It’s amazing how you can touch something so gross,” I commented.

“I’ve gotten tired of seeing all the weird stuff in this amusement park,” Kousuke sighed. “I’m not gonna be surprised by every little thing, at this point. Look, if you connect this guy to the monitors—” Giving a reply that broke the flow of our conversation, Kousuke pressed strongly on the smartbug’s butt (I can’t actually tell which side is the head and which is the butt because of its shape, but for now it’s the end towards the bottom of the screen). When he did that, out stretched a cable that looked like braided spider silk. Pulling it out, Kousuke plugged the cable into the monitor, and he caressed the smartbug’s screen to operate it.

Somehow, he seems used to it. Alone, he had managed to explore the amusement park, and even obtain a convenient item(?) like the smartbug... This childhood friend of mine really *is* having his fill of this alternate dimension.

Sitting down again, I politely watched over him; it’s useless to try to say anything to a man who’s trying to mess with a machine. My dad’s the same way. I’d only get in the way and get yelled at. I have no idea what’s so fun about this stuff, though.

Just watching is boring, so I try chatting with him. “Hey, about earlier... Come to think of it,” I asked, “why is Torii-san in this amusement park?”

“Ahh, certainly Torii-san isn’t the type to come to an amusement park,” he agreed.

That’s not it. “No, I mean, I get that you and Utena-san went shopping in a distant town, but Torii-san wasn’t with you, right?” I clarified. “Although I kind of have the feeling that you three are always together. ”

“No, Torii-san only started getting involved with Kagamimori pretty recently, you know?” Kousuke was busy fiddling with the smartbug, so his attitude was rather blunt. “At best, it’d be a few months ago. After that though, sure, we

were pretty much always together in school. But everyone's in different grades, so it's not like we're stuck together the whole time."

"Kagamimori doesn't really get close to Torii-san outside of school, either," he continued. "It's like that when we go shopping, too— it's usually just Kagamimori and I."

"Then why and how did Torii-san also wander into this alternate dimension?" I wondered. "I know about you, Kagamimori, and Kurashima, too. He was probably nearby, after all. Distance-wise, we were basically in the same place. You guys in your meeting place at the shrine, and me in my electronics store right next door." I kind of get the feeling that something's not right.

"For instance," I continued, "if there was some sort of space-time distortion or hole that appeared in our area and connected us to this space... If Torii-san was the only one in a different place, isn't it weird that she's here?"

"No, she *was* nearby, though." Kousuke talked while looking back and forth between the monitor and his smartbug. "In front of the burning shrine, Torii-san and Kurashima-san were arguing for some reason. Torii-san, she was being grabbed by the hand, too. I was pretty surprised, you know?"

"Torii-san and Kurashima-san?" I wonder why. Those two didn't seem to have a lot to do with each other, but I wonder if they're acquaintances or something. Yet from what I saw earlier, Kurashima basically didn't talk to Torii at all. No, it might just be because my impression of Utena being wrapped around Kurashima the entire time is too strong. But still, they seemed too distant to be acquaintances.

Kousuke must have found it strange, too, now that he thought about it, because he tilted his head. "I have no idea," he said at last. "Why was Torii-san there... Was she fighting with Kurashima-san? The fire got worse before I could try to find out. It was all a huge mess."

Untangling the mess of cable that came out of the smartbug, Kousuke tapped the liquid crystal screen with a 'how's this?' face. In an instant, the countless monitors in front of us all turned off at once.

He probably did something unnecessary and broke all the monitors in this control room. I suspected.

■CHANNEL20■

Immediately afterwards, the screens once again displayed their feeds. The endlessly lined up monitors displayed one large image, as if they were all connected; sure, each monitor had a distinct border. But, taking in the sight as a whole, it felt like the entire wall had become a single TV screen.

The camera, which up until just now was only able to show Utena's face, now displayed her whole body. The image was broken up by grid-like screen borders, but she still struck a magnificent standing figure and gave off a slightly flashy impression, somehow. She wore a tiara-like decoration on her head. In her hands, she gripped a microphone that looked like a magical girl's transformation stick. She was still wearing her uniform, but her face was all smiles, and she was jumping around like a rabbit.

"What the heck is this?" I asked, moved to shame by this outlandish sight. It looked like Kousuke didn't have an answer for my question because he, too, was staring like an idiot with his mouth agape.

Apparently, Utena was standing on a stage. The stage, which was built with what looked like countless interlocked matchsticks, was lit with a bright spotlight. It was probably just the angle of the camera, but I found it hard to tell the shapes and sizes of the people in the large crowd apart; they appeared as a bunch of shadows around the stage. Those people were currently waving their hands, with extreme enthusiasm, in time to Utena's movements.

It was like some idol's concert, not like I've ever seen that sort of thing in person. But you'll encounter this type of event, whether you like it or not, when you watch TV.

The charmingly decorated Utena was smiling broadly as she waved to the crowd. She seemed very excited, and she was blushing as she shed drops of sweat while singing enthusiastically. This was an incomprehensible sight, bordering on the unbelievable, and because I was watching it through a set of monitors, it felt even less real; this composite image was like a TV show.

“W-what the heck?” I stuttered. “That’s Kagamimori-san...right?”

“I’m turning on the audio,” Kousuke said. “I can’t change the volume, though, so it might be a bit loud.” I curled up and retreated slightly from the shock. Looking at me exasperatedly out of the corner of his eyes, Kousuke tapped his smartbug.

Instantly, an explosion of sound boomed out from the speakers. “THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU ALL SO MUUUUCCHHHH!!!” It was Utena’s voice, piercingly sharp and metallic.

She was standing, enthralled in performing, and clinging to the mic stand in front of her. Taking a moment to breathe, I raised my head and looked at the monitors again. Just as I expected, her smile was like an innocent child’s.

“For coming to my live!” she gushed. “No, for coming to hear Utena sing! No, thanks for being born!! I love you all! Utena is also super, suuuper happy!!!” In response to Utena’s shouting voice, the crowd raised a roar as loud as the ocean. They were cheering, clapping in rhythm, stamping their feet...the countless sounds blended together, and it felt like they would last forever.

As if she was parting the sea of noise, Utena gripped her mic like a handgun; she closed one eye, and started to sing. **“WHY CAN’T I SEE? WHY CAN’T I SEE???”** Raising her fist, Utena spun her song, and the crowd cheered in chorus. In the cramped control room, her voice echoed in the empty space, and it felt like it was striking my entire body.



The numbing reverberation was actually painful, and I folded up, trying to make my body smaller. Utena had a lisp, so I couldn't make out most of the actual lyrics— it was like the cry of a bird or cat.

The position for the audio receiver must have been bad. While I could easily hear the thick melody of the song, I could only hear Utena singing intermittently — even though she was singing with all her heart, opening her mouth so wide one would think it's her entire face— and it made me worried.

"It's in English." Kousuke quietly murmured. "That Kagamimori, she's surprisingly good at studying. Because her parents are strict, or rather, it's because she has to keep them happy, you see... I'm not sure, but she's probably singing in English." While messing around with his smartbug, Kousuke tried to fix the audio.

Eventually, Utena's singing voice came through clearly: **"ALL THE COLORS THAT YOU SEE???"** As if it was inside out, Utena's voice was piercing enough to cut steel.

Somehow, I'm able to listen to it and translate the lyrics in my head: *Why can't I see, why can't I see, all the colors that you see...* But that singing voice...I felt like it didn't fit the saccharine and cute Utena, enough that I could say it felt unnatural, because there was a bitterness to the voice. It was like she was appealing to someone, "please don't kill me."

"PLEASE CAN I BE...PLEASE CAN I BE—" Pitched forward, Utena looked around the crowd, and her eyes were glittering like stardust. It looked like she was watching a dream; those moist eyes reflected the shapes of the crowd, which had become nothing but shadowy silhouettes. Utena shook her body as if she was courting them, painfully twisting her hips...she was keenly trying to express something.

"—COLORFUL AND..." Did she lose her breath on that final word? The last word that she squeezed out in something near a whisper— "free"— echoed. An interim song started playing, and Utena let out a rough breath, as if she had just been running full tilt. It looked like she was writhing in pain and agony, and it made me wonder why she was going through so much trouble to sing; I just couldn't understand it.

However, even if I was with her, I don't think I'd be able to tell her to stop. She's betting her life on this. I felt such a strong drive from her, as if to say 'It's fine if I die after this song.' She had the vigor of a demon, although I'm not sure why.

Wiping the sweat on her cheek with her sleeve, Utena stretched as if she was pulling herself upward, like a puppet entangled in its own strings. The motion looked involuntary, as if she wasn't moving under her own will, or like how when one practices something over and over countless times, until their body moves on its own. I'm the same when I work at my family's store, where I can space out and still sort inventory, even while watching a daydream.

Absorbed in the event, Utena took a deep breath, and infused her body with fighting spirit. She started singing again: **"WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON?! CAN SOMEONE TELL ME PLEASE—"** Belting out a long phrase all at once, Utena muddled the end of it, earnestly moistening her eyes. Even the frenzied audience swallowed their breaths, so as to watch over her. I was also drawn in, and at some point I abandoned thought and immersed myself in the spectacle.

I still don't know what this feed is supposed to be. *Why is Utena an idol?* I wondered. But, I was absolutely fascinated. Everything about her shone.

Ahh, I thought wistfully. Would I ever be able to become this absorbed in something? To become so desperate and serious for something that I would squeeze out every last drop of my vitality— would that happen even once in my life? Me, who is just letting myself rot, allowing every day to pass around me... At this rate, it's like I haven't lived at all; instead, I'm just dying slowly. I was a little jealous of Utena.

The strong, dark feelings, like pain and anguish, brought on by listening to her song turned my head into a mess. Without realizing it, I clutched at my head— it hurt— like it was splitting.

Utena was trying to live with all of her might, and I was hit by the force of it before I'd had any chance to prepare myself. I felt like I'd be crushed into dust. Kousuke looked at me, slightly worried; I didn't react at all to that gaze, and instead remained fixated on the monitors.

"WHY I'M SWITCHING FASTER THAN THE CHANNELS ON TV—" Utena's

singing voice resounded so rapidly that I found myself losing the will to keep translating. Every once in a while, her body was enveloped by the crowd of shadows, dyeing it in darkness. Yet as I had that thought, her body was bathed in a spotlight, which bleached it once more. My eyes hurt with all the flashing. Like an image off of an old monochrome-era TV, the light switched on and off with dizzying speed. Black, then white, blackwhiteblackwhiteblackwhite... “— **I’M black THEN I’M white. NO!!! SOMETHING ISN’T RIGHT!!**” There, the feed was abruptly cut.

■ECHO4■

Sayuri was executing her fixed-point observation duties in the mountains—setting up machines at designated points, and observing the terrain and vegetation of the area, according to instructions. Be that as it may, it's not like this was her life's calling. She's never learned the details of doing this, only mimicking what she saw from others, and she did what seemed right.

"Aahhhh—" With a cigarette in her mouth, she recorded all the observed data by hand, and then, carrying the machinery, she moved to the next observation point. Her legs, hips, and arms have become well-trained, probably from all the daily farm work; this much weight is nothing for her.

Under the scorching rays of the sun, Sayuri wiped off her sweat with a towel she had draped across her neck. That movement almost caused her towel to light on fire because of the cigarette, and she panicked a little.

"Whoah!" If she caused a mountain fire, she'd instantly be fired. The original manager of this mountain, with his legs and hips weakened with age, allowed her to take over his job as a favor. As a reward, she was able to live in the mountain cabin that was the foundation of her livelihood. There's no way she could allow herself to cause him trouble.

At least, not until her daughter was able to live on her own. *I want to protect this lifestyle* she thought, *after that, no matter what happens, I don't care*. Her own life was already over—the present was just a dream she was having in her last moments, a dream of her remaining years.

This mountain is not well maintained; there are no real hiking paths. Sayuri forced her way through an animal trail that you could just barely say wasn't *not* a path. The lingering summer heat seeped through to her bones and stole away her stamina; Sayuri staggered, nearly falling over. The unhealthy lifestyle of her youth was coming back to haunt her. She's gained muscle, but her bones, innards, and meat were in tatters. Sayuri was a living corpse, and she used up all of her vitality long ago.

"I'm going to have to be more careful..." Sayuri grumbled to herself, and used

a nearby tree that could support her weight to regain her balance. She was in the middle of a fairly tall mountain. If she inadvertently stepped wrong and fell off a cliff or something, she'd die. Sayuri didn't really feel like she was living, but she also didn't really want to die, either.

Today, her daughter was waiting at home. Sayuri still had to cook for her daughter, and she had laundry to do as well. Her daughter was still at an age to need her protection. At least, until she became a proper adult, Sayuri had a responsibility to continue repeating these days.

"Hm?" Sayuri became suspicious. Normally, she wouldn't stop in this kind of place— when doing her fixed-point observations, she would just move from point to point without looking around. That's why, up until now, she'd passed by without noticing anything...but now, she'd found something strange: the entrance was hidden behind some thickets and trees so it was hard to notice, but there seemed to be a cave or something there.

There stood a dark hole or cave, leading right into the middle of the mountain. Sayuri's first thought was that it might be a bear's den, but the only wild animals that should be living around here would be stuff like dogs, of both the regular stray and raccoon variety. *Bears don't exist here*, Sayuri thought. *But then, what is this hole? Is it just a naturally formed hole?*

No, she realized, *there's an animal trail that goes into the cave*. It was more like a well-worn trail in the vegetation than an actual path, though. Something, or someone, had passed through here many times.

The trail was slightly different from the one Sayuri always took to do her fixed-point observations. Leaning the machine against a nearby tree, Sayuri stared fixedly at the new trail.

There were footprints, different from the ones Sayuri left behind with her own boots. They seemed to be left behind by running shoes— even though this was a mountain trail, the person who made these tracks must be a novice at hiking. *Did one of the children from town climb the mountain to play on a lark?* she wondered. *Children these days are all indoorsy types, would any of them bother to come this deep into the mountains?*

"Hrm," Sayuri thought out loud. "If it really is a child, it would be bad if they're

stuck...I have to scold them and send them home.” Sayuri was rather unwilling, but she couldn’t have people damaging the mountain on a whim. And if there was an accident, there could be injuries, so she’d have to deal with that, too. Thinking these things, Sayuri proceeded into the trail towards the cave. It wasn’t far away, and she reached it quickly.

Sayuri tried to peek inside the cave, but it was too dark to see into from the outside. She remembered that she had a flashlight, so she turned it on before stepping inside, fumbling around (but nevertheless careful in her motions).

Apparently, this cave was not naturally formed. At first there were bumps and divots in the ground, but it quickly became flat, and then it was eventually paved over with concrete. Her footsteps echoed in the empty cave. Stooping slightly as she moved forward, Sayuri eventually came upon an open space.

“What’s this—?” The cigarette she had in her mouth had finally burned to its base. Feeling the heat, Sayuri hastily spat it out, and stomped out the embers with the sole of her shoe. Once again, she raised her head to observe her surroundings.

A small building stood there, in the open space within the cave. Surrounded by tall cliffs on every side, there was also a tree growing which cut off the light from the ceiling, rendering the area dim and gloomy. The sunlight that did shine through those branches gave the area a magical feel.

But really, Sayuri wondered, what is this building doing here? It looked like a log house. The building was a shack, made by stacking wood into a cube shape. It was shaped like a giant CRT TV.

The building was partially buried by the surrounding greenery, so it looked like a ruin, and the inside would be one room, six tatami mats wide at best.

“It’s a bit too well-made to be a secret base built by a child...” Sayuri had no idea that there was such an enigmatic thing built here while she was managing the mountain (even though she was just standing in for the real manager). She hadn’t heard anything about it from her predecessor, either.

Could it be the house of an apparition, or something? Thinking such thoughts,

Sayuri ended up making herself chuckle. She should no longer be at an age to enjoy such fantasies.

Just in case, she took a picture of the building. She would report it to the proper authorities later; it should probably be investigated. In the worst case, it could be some criminal's hideout.

"Or I could just pretend I never found this place," she mused. "That would be nice." Hanging the camera by a string around her neck, Sayuri stepped up to the shack— she should probably investigate a little more. There was still time in the day, and she was in no rush to finish her fixed-point observation duties.

It was just simple curiosity. Sayuri was surprised that she still had such feelings inside of her.

■ECHO5■

Right from the start, though, Sayuri couldn't get in.

In a rather cheeky move, it was locked. The door didn't move an inch when she pulled on it; neither pushing nor pulling worked. There were no other entrances, either, so Sayuri had no choice but to give up on the idea. There was a window, but that was locked tight, too; and there wasn't any pressing reason to break the window or put a hole in a wall or anything.

Thinking about it, it was natural that the shed was locked, but Sayuri was still a little disappointed. But, she did find something interesting. Peeking into the shack from the window, she found something that should not exist in this town.

Why is that thing here? she wondered. *In this small shack?* There were several possibilities she could think of, but Sayuri wanted to deny all of them if she could.

Inside the shack were countless Idol goods: posters; fans; collectable photos. There were also telephone cards that actually seemed nostalgic now, as well as DVDs, Blu-rays, and even VHS and cassette tapes that were rare for this age. It was dark, so she couldn't make out what was on the DVDs' packaging and labels, though.

Sayuri shivered. She felt the need to throw up.

There were enough large posters to completely cover the walls and ceiling. The half-open closet had reproductions of Idol costumes inside. All of them were familiar to Sayuri— there was no way she would mistake them.

The shack also had a high quality TV and some other device, possibly for playing music, inside. They were all recent models— at the very least, there had been someone living here for the past few years, surrounded by idol goods.

“Hanemori Joururi,” Sayuri read. All the idols featured on the posters were the same person.

Hanemori Joururi. That room was packed full with a large amount of her related goods. “She should be dead,” Sayuri said to herself.

The next thing she knew, Sayuri had already returned to the cabin that was her home. It seems she didn’t forget her machine, and even managed to finish her job of doing the fixed-point observations, but she had no memory of doing so. It was like her body had been doing the job it was already so used to on its own, while she was half asleep.

But her thoughts were still on what was inside the shack in that cave— although Sayuri was already starting to think it was just a hallucination. Sayuri kept thinking, even though she felt like her head was gently coming to a boil. *What the hell was that? Was I daydreaming?* Sayuri really wanted that to be so. She didn’t want to remember the name “Hanemori Joururi,” after all this time.

“Mother.” Standing in a small field in front of their cabin, her daughter turned around. “Welcome back. ...Did something happen?” The girl tilted her head slightly.

Saying, “I’m back” reflexively, Sayuri surprised even herself with how relieved she felt when she did that. She had returned to her daily life, and there was relief there. The cabin, her life here, and her daughter had become where Sayuri belonged, even more than she thought it had.

“Mother, you’re sweating a lot.” The daughter was suspicious of her mother, who was acting strangely. Smiling to reassure her that there was nothing wrong, Sayuri was overcome with love for her daughter, and stepped towards her.

The small field next to their cabin was a kitchen garden meant to raise simple vegetables; recently, her daughter was the one managing it. It was better than her just spacing out in the house and doing nothing, so Sayuri let her do what she wanted. Her daughter didn't read, and there was nothing else for entertainment, like a working TV, in their house...Sayuri was a little worried for her daughter, who lacked any hobbies. If she was interested in growing vegetables, Sayuri would teach her, and eventually have her help with the farm work.

Sayuri fantasized a little about such a happy future. "I'll go make dinner right away," she said. "Is there anything you want to eat?" Speaking with her daughter lightheartedly as she approached, Sayuri was startled: she heard music. It was music she wasn't used to. The song had an uptempo melody, and a warped, dissonant sound leapt up at her.

Sayuri couldn't make out the lyrics, but apparently this was a song, and it sounded like it was echoing from somewhere far away. Like some sort of siren, it was the kind of repeating sound that makes you strangely uneasy. For a second, Sayuri thought it was her daughter singing, but that wasn't the case. The girl was looking up at Sayuri, puzzled, without opening her mouth. She was on her knees in the tilled field, and looked like a scarecrow that had been thrown away. Her hand moved strangely, and that movement produced a sound.

"What...what's this sound...? What are you doing?" Sayuri thought that her daughter had somehow gotten her hands on something that could play music, and that she was currently using it. Sayuri had no recollection of getting her something like that, though— did she borrow it from a friend, or something?

Unlike these deep mountains, the nearby town was overflowing with music. Her daughter had probably taken some of that music back to the cabin to listen to. At least, that's what Sayuri thought— apparently, she was wrong. Once again, Sayuri shivered.

In front of her daughter was a familiar CRT TV. It had been placed on a pile of unused and rusted farming tools that were arranged to look like an altar of sorts. In the dimming light of dusk, the pile of farming tools looked like a person's shadow for just a moment: it was a grotesque figure, with a TV for a

head.

Looking at it calmly, it was just a pile of oversized garbage though. You can take the screen off of this TV. And in the hollow inside, there was a bird's nest. Sayuri had forgotten that she already knew that. Her daughter had taken this useless TV and adorned it here, like a precious treasure.

■ECHO6■

Sayuri timidly started talking to her daughter. "Didn't...you throw this TV away?" she asked.

"No," her daughter explained, "because you said that I could have it."

I might have said that Sayuri thought. Although, she had meant that her daughter should throw it away.

Her daughter was staring at the broken TV, which was decorating the altar, with a passion. This scene— which would give one cause to doubt her daughter's sanity— worried Sayuri, and she placed her hand on her daughter's shoulder. Then, she noticed something and was relieved: there were baby birds in the nest inside the TV, and they were crying. They had hatched from the eggs that she had found inside when they'd first cracked it open. Sayuri had thought that they were definitely rotten, but apparently she was wrong. Her daughter had warmed them, and gotten them to hatch. Or maybe she had gotten new eggs to hatch, or even actual baby birds from somewhere else, because the eggs really had been rotten?

Sayuri wasn't sure of the details, but it looked like her daughter was using the TV as a birdcage, and was raising the chicks. Sayuri remembered doing something similar when she was young, although only at the level of placing a nesting box in the backyard and watching the birds that gathered. The hollowed out TV was nothing more than a box at this point, so it made some sense to use it as a nesting box.

Her daughter, whose thoughts Sayuri could never understand, had taken in and was attempting to raise life. Such a thing warmed Sayuri's heart. *That girl must also have love inside of her. This would be a good experience for her,*

Sayuri thought.

“Those birds,” said Sayuri, “are you raising them? What do they eat?” Depending on the situation, Sayuri was thinking of helping, so she asked. But, expecting her daughter to get mad, she did so with an upward look, like she was slightly ashamed of asking.

“B-book. I researched about it in a book,” her daughter said. “So it should be fine, can I be allowed to raise them?”

“Sure,” Sayuri told her. “I gave you this TV completely, with the birds inside and all.” Feeling happy, Sayuri laughed. Stroking her daughter’s head once, she turned back towards the cabin in order to make dinner. She kind of felt like making a feast today.

“MY ENEMY’S INVISIBLE, I DON’T KNOW HOW TO FIGHT.” Startled, Sayuri stiffened up before turning around. Once again, she heard someone singing.

Now that she thought about it, she still hadn’t figured out what was causing that music. She was too busy being happy because she’d seen a new side of her daughter. *What’s this song, and who is singing it?* Sayuri needed to find the source of the noise that painfully rang in her ears. Trembling, Sayuri looked at her daughter. She was no longer paying any attention to her mother, instead staring heatedly at the TV.

Raising her arms, Sayuri’s daughter formed a symbol with her fingers that seemed almost religious. That wasn’t it. She was holding something in her hands; it was earthworms, which are often found in farming fields. She was going to feed them to the chicks. Usually this sort of thing creeps girls out, but she was handling them with no hesitation while she fed the chicks.

The baby birds were crying desperately for food. The chicks’ cries probably mixed together, creating the song-like melody that Sayuri’s brain interpreted as words. It would be great if it really was just an abnormal phenomenon, and that she was just having auditory hallucinations.

Her daughter noticed Sayuri’s gaze. Turning around, she put on a troubled face. “It’s pretty hard, adjusting the musical intervals. I can’t sing it very well,” she said with an embarrassed smile, as if it was obvious. Then, she went on singing: **“THE TREMBLING FEAR IS MORE THAN I CAN TAKE.”**

“Truthfully, I’d like to sing more like this,” Sayuri’s daughter remarked, before she raised her voice along with the birds. Their singing voices entwined, reverberating off of each other.

Sayuri trembled violently. She had purposefully kept her daughter away from music, because she had awful memories of it. She never even sung her daughter any lullabies, but this world is overflowing with music. The town is filled with it. Someone is always playing music, that either they or someone else had made, and Sayuri couldn’t go around plugging her ears forever. Even these mountains are filled with the sounds of nature: the cries of birds, bugs, and beasts; the sound of the wind, and the rustling of leaves; the sound of sirens one would occasionally hear from the town. All of that must have built up in her daughter.

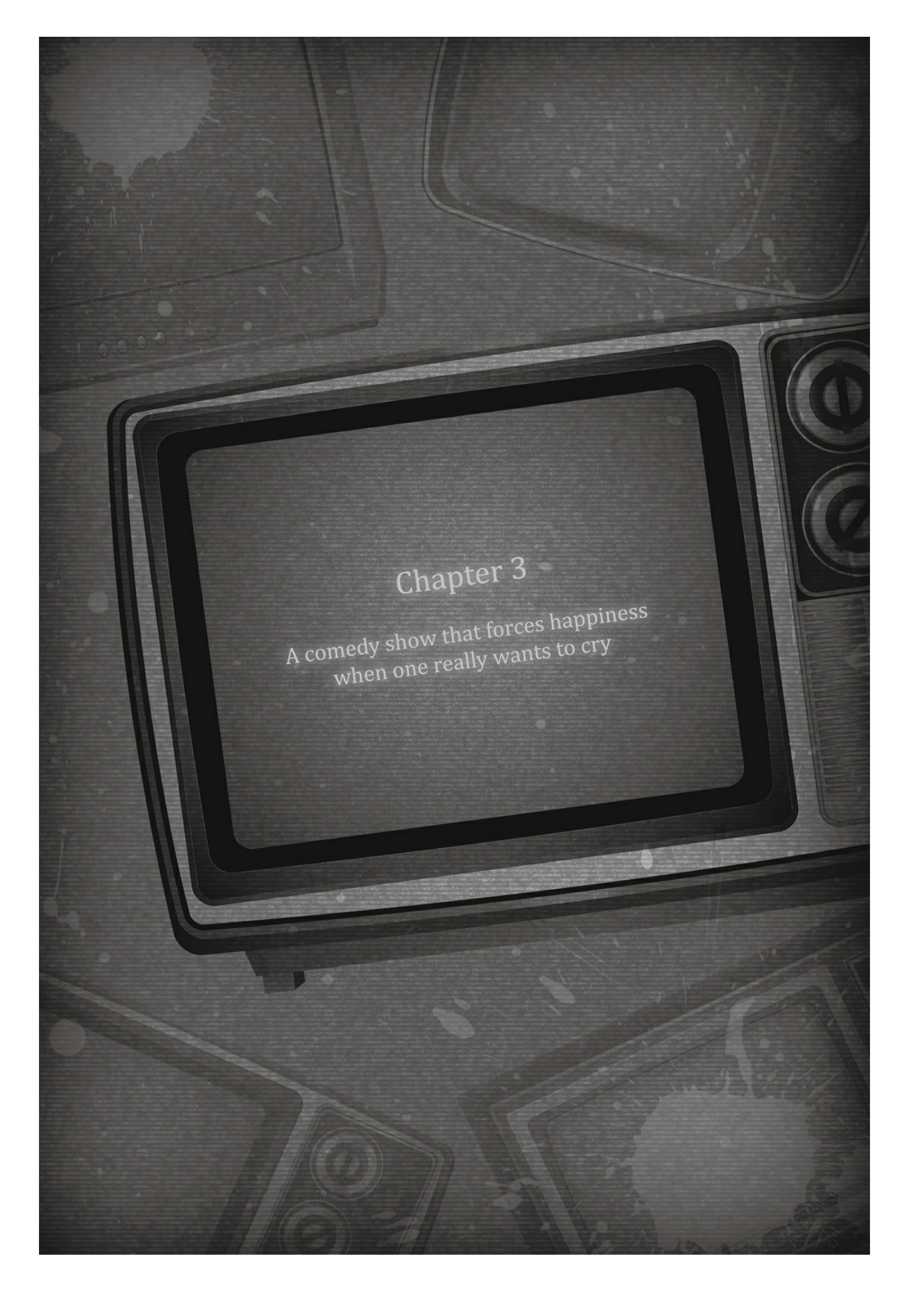
“—WHEN I’M UP AGAINST THE ECHO IN THE MIRROR,” her daughter sang. Countless sounds jumped about and echoed. Agitating the rotten eggs, the chicks inside the CRT TV raised a strange cry.

The altar of junk, enshrined behind Sayuri’s daughter, reflected the light of the sunset. It backlit her outline in a fantastical manner, but her head was the shape of a square, a TV. She had several arms growing, here and there. She looked like a monster, or a foreign god of some sort.

The thing that should have been Sayuri’s daughter, that she took great pains to give birth to...

“ECHO!” With her whole body dyed black with shadow, Sayuri’s daughter continued to sing like a broken machine.





Chapter 3

A comedy show that forces happiness
when one really wants to cry

■CHANNEL21■

Kousuke looked like he would fall into the blacked out monitor, he was hitting it so hard. Scared, I called out to him.

“Kousuke,” I gently came up behind Kousuke, who was tilting his head, looking troubled. “What happened?” I asked. “Did that monitor break? Actually, maybe the power is out— it seems like the park is nearing closing time. Maybe they just cut off the power, so the monitors turned off?” Mixing in a little self-deprecation, I continued to speak. “You’re new at this, aren’t you? Move aside. I run an electronics store, and I’ve watched dad repair lots of TVs. I’m more familiar with electronics than you, too. I might be able to fix it, maybe?”

“You’re no expert,” he retorted, “all you do is work the counter.” Kousuke continued to mess around with the cable connecting his smartbug to the monitor, his embarrassment obvious, while refusing to turn around. He didn’t like that I had tried to act important.

There was no particular change with the smartbug, and it kept emitting a faint glow. I don’t really understand what’s with this smartbug; is it a living thing, or a machine? Because the answer to that isn’t clear, it’s probably better to not assume that common sense applies to it. *The lights in this control room still work*, I realized. *That means that it isn’t a problem with the electricity.*

Although, whether or not this dimension would have a proper electrical system, one that actually made sense, is unclear. On the other hand, if this park didn’t run on electricity, I wouldn’t even be able to imagine what it does run on.

Wait, the lights have also started flickering on and off. Looking up at the ceiling, there were several naked light bulbs lined up, and they were turning on and off at even intervals. It didn’t seem like they were reaching the end of their lifespan and going out; this was more proof that there was a problem with the electrical supply.

“That’s weird... Actually, what the hell was that video, anyway? That was Kagamimori, wasn’t it? Why did she seem so much like an idol...?” It seemed like Kousuke is trying to change the subject.

He's flustered because of some unexpected technical difficulties, even though he was full of confidence when he showed off this control room, and bragged about his smartbug. It's not like this would be the thing to make me disappointed in him, after all this time... I already knew that my childhood friend was a klutz and a bit of an idiot, after all.

He was cute being all flustered, so I couldn't help but put on a wide smirk. Kousuke, who saw my smile, looked unhappy as he started fidgeting hard with his legs while he was sitting on the floor.

"No matter how unfazed Kagamimori could be, there's no way she would start a karaoke session in this situation..." he commented. "But we only happened to see the video feed just now, so it's not like someone could've staged it. I guess that girl does have a side of her that just can't read the room, in a sense."

"I don't think there's any need for her to read a room, she's a princess," I retorted. "Come on, Kousuke, get out of the way. I'll fix it. 'Hello, nice to meet you, I'm from Denkiya,' remember?"

"I don't remember asking for repairs or even calling you over," he said stiffly. I calmed down after seeing Kousuke get a little offended. Kousuke hasn't asked for my help, as an employee of an electronics store, in all the time I've known him. But really, even though I've managed to learn by watching my parents, I'm still just the daughter in a family that runs an electronics store. I'd be in trouble if he actually asked me to help.

At school, I was often asked things like, "X thing is acting funny, can you take a look?" or, "Can you get me some batteries or light bulbs?" It was like a greeting. Getting asked these things was natural.

At school, I was just the daughter of a family that owned an electronics store. I'm also partially at fault because I would play along, thinking it easier for people to remember if I introduced myself this way. There weren't many people who would call me 'Hitomi,' as if we were close, although that was because I had spent my days letting life pass me by without getting too involved with anyone.

But Kousuke probably has no business with 'Denkiya.' He would always be the

one to drag me out into the outside world, which was filled with light in comparison to my dark store, where it seemed like time had stopped sometime during the Showa era. That was in the past, but I can't break myself from the habit even now. Some of it still remains in me, and that made me happy.

Even now, Kousuke still seemed like he'd smell of that field in which we used to run around as children... I bring my face closer. There was nothing but the choking greasy smell of tobacco; it was a little disappointing. *Wait*, I realized, *I don't only smell tobacco*.

"Hey Kousuke," I asked him, "don't you smell something weird?"

"Hm? really? Isn't it just tobacco— wait...it's you, isn't it?" he accused. "You stink."

"I don't stink," I objected. "I just took a shower... This might be bad."

I felt a familiar bad premonition, so I went over to the rusted ladder on the side of the wall and placed my hand on it. There was a set of double doors at the top of this ladder which led to the surface, and the outside. I thought I could smell something unpleasant leaking through the gap in those doors. It was a smell I was already used to, that I just now got a whiff of again: the smell of something burning. Fearfully, I started to climb the ladder.

Noticing my actions, Kousuke looked suspiciously at me. "Oi, what happened?"

"Don't look this way, idiot," I shot back at him. "I'm wearing a skirt, and I don't want you staring at my panties."

"You didn't need to call me an idiot," he grumbled. "Why are girls so annoying?"

"Guys are the ones who should care more. ...Woah, this is bad! There really is a fire up here!" Opening the double doors at the top and peeking outside a little, I panicked. I'm just exhausted. Rather than feeling scared or surprised, I've built up so much stress and frustration that I can't take it any more.

The surface was a sea of fire. There was smoke everywhere, obscuring my vision. The merry-go-round, located on top of the control room, was on fire. Under all that paint, the headless horses were apparently all made out of wood,

and all of them had become large balls of fire. There was something floating in the air that was burnt to a crisp, and decorations that had melted from the heat were falling down.

At some point without me noticing, the area above the control room— where I was rekindling an old friendship with my childhood friend in peace, separated by only a thin layer— had become a burning hell. This was no time to be spacing out, thinking things like, ‘What’s going on?’ Sparks danced, and the fire was spreading towards me, along with a blast of burning wind.

“Hya?!” I squawked in surprise. The oxygen enclosed in the control room, which was almost completely airtight, was now released out into the blaze that was happening outside— and the fire leapt in. A violent fire swirled in the underground room, and I was lucky just to have not been instantly burnt black.

I was simply blown back off the ladder by the burning wind and fell down, managing to get away with my skin being only slightly roasted. “Wh-whoah,” I stuttered, having been immensely startled.

It’s hot and it hurt, and I wanted to cry. Like a baby who’s been slapped on the cheek, I had no idea what was going on, simply writhing around on the ground in pain. You could also say that I was in so much pain from taking the force of the fall over my entire body, that all I could do was roll around. Luckily, the fall didn’t cause any sprains or break any bones. I just lost all my reason and ability to think as a human.

■CHANNEL22■

Startled, Kousuke ran over to me with rather amazing speed. “You okay, Hitomi?!”

There’s no way I’m alright you idiot! It hurts it’s hot I think I’m gonna die— before I had time to yell those things at him, Kousuke embraced me and lifted me up. He put me under his arm lightly, like a piece of baggage, before scowling up at the surface.

Fire intermittently leapt through the door, like a serpent’s tongue. So as not to get cooked, Kousuke held on to me and took a step back.

“W-what the hell is going on...” he wondered. “A fire? Oh yeah, you were covered in soot, and there was a building on fire. Did it spread?”

“Dunno,” I answered. “This place is a little far from where the fire was... so I don’t think so. K-Kousuke? Can you let me down for a bit?” I asked nicely, and got him to put me down. My skin and my back, which hit the floor when I fell, were throbbing in pain. I thought I would die, but the actual wounds were surprisingly light.

However, this pain was a fairly fresh feeling for someone who spent their days in safety, and it somehow gave me some peace of mind. My senses were gradually being numbed— my thoughts, too. Inside my head, thoughts of ‘I hate this’ were swirling round and round. *Why is all this happening?* I wondered. Even though I had just been tending to the storefront, bored, like always. Even though I had school tomorrow, even though mom and dad were playing in the city without a care in the world. Tears started coming out, large in both size and number, but they quickly evaporated in the hot wind.

My face isn’t burned, is it? What should I do, if my face is all messed up... I don’t want Kousuke to see me like that. But I don’t have a mirror, and I have no idea what kind of face I’m making right now.

I touch my face over and over again, meaninglessly.

Actually, I might be panicking quite hard, though up until now I’ve been able to accept everything rather calmly, even in this dimension. I was able to avoid taking any damage because it felt like this was all somebody else’s problem. Like it was happening on TV, I felt that I was watching something from far away. Like that, I was suddenly hit with very real pain all over my body.

“Y-you alright, Hitomi?” Repeating his question, Kousuke scrunched up his brow. “This is bad. What the hell is going on? Stuff is falling down all over the place up there, we’ll be buried alive. We need to escape quickly. Can you move, Hitomi? If you can’t, I’ll carry you out.”

“S-sorry,” I apologized weakly. “I don’t think I can. I’m counting on you, Kousuke. I think my hips have given out from the shock.” It’s almost funny how little I can move, like I no longer have any nerves reaching down to my feet. Are people— am I— something that becomes like this when driven into a corner? I

felt a little admiration, like it was happening to someone else. I grasped onto Kousuke's trousers like a lost child. And then I noticed something strange, although it was a little late for that. "Huh? Why are you wearing your school uniform?"

We shouldn't have had school today. No matter how little interest he has in fashion, no one would put on such a stuffy uniform if they didn't have to. Kousuke should have been going out shopping with Utena, too.

Now that I think about it, both Utena and Torii were in uniform, too. I feel a little guilty thinking this, but Torii also seems to be like Kousuke as people who don't really care what they're wearing... It's not *too* farfetched for either of them to be wearing their uniform when it's not a school day. But if Utena was going out shopping, it seems like she'd dress up.

By the way, when I'm minding the store I usually put on my uniform. Internally, I treat my uniform like work clothes that I don't mind getting dirty. I was thinking about trivial stuff like that. The order of my thoughts is messed up. In reality, this is no time to be worrying about how people dress. Kousuke probably thinks the same, because a look of wonderment only crossed his face for a moment before he switched gears to find a way to overcome this sudden calamity.

Desperately looking around like a small, cowardly bird, he said: "Oi, Hitomi, we're gonna douse ourselves in water. Soak a towel and put it over your head, too. After that, we're gonna run full tilt through the flames. That's our plan, got it?"

"What? No way," I objected. "Won't the flames go out if we wait?"

"I don't think there's a fire station here in this dimension, probably," he guessed. "The fire will probably die out once there's nothing left to burn, but before that happens we'll either suffocate or burn to death."

Smoke sinks because it's heavier than air. Enough noxious gas has been coming in to make the cigarettes Kousuke smoked earlier seem like nothing. Certainly, if we stayed here all that would be waiting for us is death. I felt miserable for trying to pass things off as someone else's problem, even in this situation.

I bit my lower lip. I don't think I'll be able to wait for someone to do this for me. Not in this awful alternate dimension where crazy things and abnormal situations keep happening, one after the other.

Kousuke's panicking, too, judging from how he picked me up rather forcefully. He's strong; I can tell from his arms that he really has become a man. He's able to completely engulf the powerless me, like I'm a baby bird. I cling to him. The fear is getting to me now, and I've started to tremble like a leaf in the wind.

Right in front of me is the end, death. Staring straight at it, I was scared to the bottom of my heart.

"There's still water, right? I'm counting on you..." Stepping into the small shower, Kousuke turned the tap while praying. Instantly, a fierce torrent of warm water poured down over us. It soaked our entire bodies.

It looks like the monitors turning off and the lights flickering were all caused by the electrical lines— or whatever they use to carry electricity— burning away and becoming useless. But apparently, the pipes are still okay. This was very lucky for us, and the hot water poured out without stopping. We soaked ourselves in it. And, just like Kousuke said earlier, we gathered as many towels as we could and soaked those, too. In the midst of all that lukewarm water, I stared at the towels in a daze. "Kousuke. T-thanks."

"Why are you thanking me? We haven't even started getting out of this predicament yet," Kousuke spat out, annoyed. He started to put on the wet towels, starting from his head. I did the same, carefully, like it was a treasure. My apron was heavy with the water it absorbed. It was a bit embarrassing because my uniform became a bit see-through.

"Aww damn... This smartbug won't break in the water, will it? It's living, so rather than breaking maybe I should say dying? I went through so much trouble to pick it up, too." Kousuke was also worrying about relatively trivial things. Who cares about the life or death of a bug right now? We're on the brink ourselves.

"Nngguu—" Swallowing my saliva, I shut my eyes tight. Not because I was scared, but because some of the water from the shower fell into my eye. I closed my eyes reflexively, and it seemed like I'd inadvertently pass out right

there.

I was mysteriously calm. Kousuke was shouldering my share of fear, too. I was like a baby. Holding onto my useless self, Kousuke jumped out of the shower with all his might. From here on out, it was a match against time. Either we break through the fire before the water dries out, or we burn to death. But, for some reason, Kousuke stopped as soon as he put his hand on the ladder. He was dumbfounded.

■CHANNEL23■

“Wha—?!” Hearing Kousuke as he let out a weird sound, I wondered what was going on and opened my eyes.

The double doors that led to the surface, in which a fire was wildly raging: looking up at them, it looked like a panel cut out of some manga.

Finally, the lightbulbs lost their energy, and the control room became dim. Only the fire raging outside seemed awfully bright.

The mostly beautiful scene of fire was suddenly obstructed, and our surroundings were enclosed in darkness. It was dark enough that I couldn't see at all.

Something was looking in at us: at Kousuke and I, who were fighting desperately to stay alive.

Past the square-cut door, someone was lying down on the surface, and looking down on us, resting her chin in her palm.

“TV girl.” Quietly, her name spilled out of my mouth.

Right over there was that incomprehensible existence that I'd met right after arriving in this place, in the same merry-go-round that was above us. It seemed like a little girl, but her head was a TV; she had way too many arms, and, somehow, she wore the same high school uniform that we did.

Currently, she's looking down at us like she's seen something rare and curious. There's a huge fire raging about all around her, but she doesn't seem to

care at all.

The TV girl's black screen displayed that same strange sideways emoji. It was laughing, even in this situation.

"W-what is that thing...? You called her... 'TV girl?'" Kousuke was understandably daunted, but I didn't have the answer to his question. 'A strange lifeform that I saw earlier' doesn't mean anything, after all.

"No, I'm just calling her that. It looks like she isn't human... B-but why is she here?"

"Hmm, so she's kind of like the smartbug? They show up occasionally, monsters like this— ones that aren't like normal animals. This is the first one I've seen in the shape of a human, though." Kousuke muttered something under his breath before remembering the situation we were in and climbing the ladder once more.

Right now, we need to put making it out of here alive before anything else, but the TV girl is camped out on the only exit out of this control room. I don't think she'll attack us— she doesn't seem to have that much interest in us— but she is physically in the way. While she's still there, we can't get out.

At the very least, I tried calling out to her. "Excuse me! Can you please move?!"

"Does that thing understand words?" Kousuke asked something very appropriate. The TV girl is still unresponsive— words probably don't work on her— but there's nothing else I can do.

It probably wasn't the TV girl following my words, but... As if she simply didn't like that we were getting closer to her, she moved back slightly as we approached. Taking advantage of that small gap, Kousuke started climbing the ladder with me still under his arm.

He's pretty dextrous, because I'm just dead weight here. But I can't say, "Don't treat me like a child. I'll climb the ladder myself," after I let myself be carried all this time. Plus, even if I did so I'd only get in Kousuke's way, too. *It's pretty pleasant being carried*, I thought, and we leapt onto the surface in the blink of an eye.

Our surroundings were awash with fire. The headless horses were almost completely burnt up, looking like pitch-black monsters that had donned a cloak of flame. The surrounding fires made it so hot that the water in my eyes evaporated in a moment, making it hard to see. I coughed, and gasped for air.

“Umm—” For a moment, it seemed as if Kousuke didn’t know which way to run. The hot, burning wind mercilessly evaporated the water which soaked our clothes and the towels on our heads, taking away our lifelines, and every second, death came closer.

If we just hurry up and break out of the fire wherever, though, everything should be fine, but the situation just isn’t that simple. We can’t see the ground too well... If we were to trip on something, there’s no way we would be able to recover. There’s no choice but to carefully pick out the route with the highest chance of success.

“Oh...?” With a surprised look, Kousuke looked off in a direction. I followed his gaze.

At the end of it, the TV girl was leisurely walking around. Even though she, herself, was a very mysterious being, her actions were ones that I was very used to seeing— those of a normal girl.

Girls of my age, when we group up, tend to party and get noisy like we’re setting off fireworks. But when we’re alone, we tend to walk briskly without a word, like we’ve got too much time on our hands. We would always be quickly moving— from a dark and quiet, or boring, place, to places which were always lively.

“Oh, it’s her. Hey~! Where are you going?!” Kousuke called out to her, but the TV girl ignored him and kept walking with haste, without even looking back. It’s not like she was trying to lead us somewhere... It might just be a coincidence, but the fire seemed to be afraid of the TV girl, as it seemed to be trying to keep its distance, but only around her.

So, our safest route was wherever she was walking. Kousuke must have reached the same conclusion, because he haughtily said, “It’ll be bad if you breathe in too much smoke, so keep your mouth shut.” Right after, he dashed over in her direction. His strides were very long, and he quickly overtook the TV

girl.

The girl herself didn't mind us, and kept walking at her own pace. She was about my height, so compared to the fairly tall Kousuke, she seemed quite weak. She was a small girl. From Kousuke's point of view, I probably seem this small, too.

Her screen was no longer displaying that sideways emoji. Instead, on the TV girl's black screen, my own face was reflected like a mirror. Surprised, I opened my eyes wide enough to be circles. I felt an unusual sense of discomfort, like I was staring down my doppelganger, but that was only for an instant.

Kousuke made a beeline out of the fire without caring about the TV girl, just as she didn't seem to care about us. *He probably plans to keep running at this speed until we've reached somewhere safe*, I thought. Carrying me like precious cargo, he looked just a little bit like the heroes he so admired as we escaped from that catastrophe.

Meanwhile, I had my eyes glued to the TV girl. She caressed her own face— or screen, which had turned black, with her fingertips. Static ran across the screen, and it put on a wide, open pair of eyes that looked very much like a living being's.

Our eyes met. *No*, I thought, *maybe those are only my eyes reflected on her screen?*

Quickly, there was a lot of distance put between us, and I lost sight of her among the smoke and flames.

■CHANNEL24■

Apparently, this small building that we were in was a gift shop.

I hadn't known that there was such a normal thing for an amusement park to have here, in this strange dimension, until I had heard so from Kousuke. That being said, there was nothing here that stimulated my greed, and nothing that I would actually give money to own.

The store stocked weirdly shaped sticks; old clothes; cans and bottles of stuff whose seals may or may not have been broken (the labels were so messed up I

couldn't even tell if they were in a foreign language or not); rocks of all sizes; some ceramics that resembled the empty husk of a bug or something, and wrinkled books that must have been hit by rainwater, all crammed tightly within the store.

It was more like a garbage dump, rather than a gift shop. It reminds me of the secret base I made with Kousuke, a long time ago. What we thought of as treasures back then— stuff like sparkling bottle fragments and smooth round stones— no longer held any interest to us today. The junk in this place seemed weirdly organized, for some reason.

There's nothing approaching a store clerk in this place, and we were something like intruders that had broke in after hours, so it wasn't very comfortable here. But I couldn't complain, I couldn't be selfish. No one would protect me, not in this place. I'm just thankful that I could sit and rest safely.

After the mystery fire at the merry-go-round, I was carried by Kousuke for a while before starting to feel a little embarrassed, so I had him put me down and ran the rest of the way. I ran all the way here, lost in my survival instincts, so I didn't know where in the amusement park this was.

We ran for our lives, but for all our efforts, we were still close enough to see the merry-go-round burning in the distance. *Did the TV girl manage to get away safely?* I wondered. For some reason, I was a little worried. I empathized with her, even though I knew she wasn't me, and that it was just my face reflected on her screen.

"Hah, Haaaahhhh..." Breathing heavily, I dropped onto the floor with my legs splayed out, not caring about any potential embarrassment or the hits to my reputation I might be taking. I was still feeling the aftermath of the fire, and running away was good exercise, too, so I was running very hot at the moment. Both my hair and my uniform were once again covered in soot; my whole body was just a mess, and my shower had totally gone to waste.

I ran like I was really gonna die. Kousuke was probably even more tired than I was— he *did* carry me halfway here. He moved a bunch of souvenirs that were taking up most of the window to stare outside, being cautious, and not allowing any gaps to show.

Well, if there were to be another fire, that would be awful. Things that happen twice happen thrice, and I've already been in two fires since I've come to this alternate dimension. There's probably going to be another.

"Kousuke," I said. He's clearly in better shape than I am. Kousuke already had his regular breathing back when I called out to him, but he still didn't move a muscle in response. Like a wild animal, he wouldn't waste even a single drop of energy, in order to live.

I had thought I was one of those animals too, though. I had been letting the days pass by aimlessly, but I wasn't really living. I just wasn't dead, much like an appliance that only worked when you plugged it in. That's why I didn't really want to die.

"Hey, Kousuke," I said again. He didn't reply or even respond to me, as if he had become one of the souvenirs lining the walls... Scared, I repeated myself.

"Oh good, you're alive," said Kousuke. I thought he was worried about me, and that made me happy. But when I saw that he was playing with the smartbug in his hands, I instantly flipped over to disappointed. "I got you wet," he said to the bug in his hands, "so for a moment there I thought you were gone."

Worry about me more than your stupid bug, I wanted to say, but even I thought that sounded spoiled. After all, if Kousuke hadn't been around, I wouldn't have been able to get out of the fire, and would have burned to death. Well, if he hadn't been there I wouldn't have been invited into the control room in the first place— and I feel like I would have avoided ever being in that terrible situation. Well, whatever I say, it was a problem for later.

I got up, and looked around at the souvenirs in the shop: a broken alarm clock, a bird's corpse that looked like a dove, and ugly stuffed toys.

"What, do you want something?" he asked. I pouted a bit at that, because it sounded like he was implying the words, 'Girls sure do love to shop.'

I'm not Utena, I thought, *and I'd like it if you considered me to be my own person.*

Those were the weird sorts of thoughts that ran through my head. I still

haven't got my calm back, although I'm only just riding on the echoes of my earlier panic.

"Well, my clothes are ruined so I was hoping I could find something to change into," I answered him. I'm not sure if it's good luck or bad, but my apron survived with only a slight singeing. Probably because when I was being carried by Kousuke, my entire front, including my apron, was pressed into him. In return, though, my back was probably something awful to look at, and my uniform is in a tragic state. I've come out ahead just by being alive, though.

Taking off my bandana, I noted that it wasn't that dirty; in that case, my hair was probably fine, too. I was just a bit proud of my glossy black hair.

"You're also incredibly dirty right now," I pointed out, "so if you find something to change into, you probably should."

"Sure," he said. "That's why we came to this gift shop in the first place. Make sure you pick up anything we might need, although there's not a lot of hope for that in here." Kousuke was sitting on the floor again, messing around with the smartbug.

"If we walk a little more, there's other places similar to the control room from before," he continued. "We can take another shower there, though I don't really want to be underground for a while now."

"Agreed," I told him. "What the hell was that anyway— that fire?" To think I'd keep getting put into fires, one after the other, when a normal person would probably never even see one. Am I just destined to have anywhere I'm staying at spontaneously light up if I hang around for too long? I started to think that there were such game-like rules in place here.

Thinking meaningless thoughts, I continued to rummage around in the store's stock. I found what looked like old clothes, so I picked them up. *I'd be happy if they were cute ones*, I thought. *The colorful kind.*

■CHANNEL25■

I was startled. "This— hey, Kousuke?"

"Those are uniforms, aren't they?" Kousuke asked in a deadpan voice, and it

was just as he pointed out. The clothes that I randomly picked up were uniforms from my school. All of them are the same— all the clothes, neatly folded up here were uniforms, for both men and women. They even had shoes and the associated bags.

And all of them were old and worn. Although it was still better than the set I was wearing now, which was full of soot... It felt like I was about to wear someone's hand-me-downs, and that made me hesitate to put my arm through the sleeve.

"For some reason, all the clothes here are uniforms." Kousuke said. "I've also changed several times. Aren't Kagamimori and Torii-san the same? You didn't know, did you?"

Even if you talk about it like it's common sense, there's no way I would've known, I thought pointedly. But, well, I had finally received an answer for one of the questions I had earlier; this was the reason why those two were wearing uniforms, without it even being a school day.

The clothes in this amusement park were all school uniforms. Utena must have had similar circumstances as well, dirtying her clothes and complaining about it before actually finding a gift shop and changing into a uniform.

I have no way to confirm this, and it's relatively trivial information. Why my school's uniform is stocked in this amusement park's gift shop is a mystery; that place is neither famous nor popular. I'm starting to not even question why these things happen.

My senses are being dulled. I have a feeling that there's some important implication folded into this, though. "Kousuke, go change," I told him. "I'll do the same— Oh, this one seems good." Picking up a random uniform, I check its size: as if I had it custom ordered, it fits me perfectly. Well, it's not like uniforms have that many size differences in the first place.

On a whim, I picked up a pair of men's uniform trousers and compared it to my own waist. Wow, men's uniforms are really big! But I'm not really into crossdressing, and it's so baggy on me that I wouldn't be able to move well, anyway.

"I'm gonna change, so don't look this way," I ordered. "I'll throw you a change

of clothes, too— here.” I picked out a set of clothes that would fit Kousuke, and threw it to him.

Kousuke was focused on his smartbug and paying attention to what was going on outside, so basically, he didn’t react at all. He just wordlessly picked up the clothes I threw at him and started changing, right then and there. Hastily, I averted my eyes and started changing, myself.

“H-hey. Let’s go back to where Utena-san is, at least for now,” I suggested. “Actually, let’s just go link back up with them.” The rustling of our clothes would just sound unbearably loud if we stayed silent, so I tried holding a conversation. “Originally, I meant to just come with you for a bit and then go back... But there was so much to do, and it became late,” I admitted. “There was a fire where we were, so they might be worried.” I had my back turned to Kousuke so I wouldn’t look at him while we were changing, and I ended up kind of talking awkwardly to a wall. There was no reply, so after a while I got anxious, and turned around nervously.

Kousuke had already finished changing, and was back to staring outside; I thought he might have been looking at my reflection in the display window, but Kousuke was clearly looking towards the entrance we’d left open. The fact that he had no interest in me at all was vexing, in and of itself.

Well, fine, there seems to be something strange going on with him, anyway. Back then, I didn’t care about such things— we even got in the bath together. Then I became a woman, and Kousuke has become a man. We have more to keep private, and thus have grown apart.

“Sure, go do that,” he agreed. “Actually, hurry up and get out of this amusement park— this alternate dimension. I’ll still stay behind and look around a bit, though. On the way there, take Kagamimori and the others with you.”

“Just come with us, Kousuke,” I told him. “Well, we still have no idea if going out of one of these exits will even get us back *out*— or even if it’s possible to escape this dimension at all.”

“That’s true,” he agreed. “We still haven’t made sure of that. I haven’t tried anything, either. Because if it *is* true and we end up outside, I might not be able

to get back in to keep exploring.”

“Well I want to hurry up and go back home...” I disagreed. “You’re real weird, you know that, Kousuke?” Or maybe, he has a reason he doesn’t want to go back? I guess that he just finds it more fun to investigate this amusement park of mysteries more than to return to reality, where he’s worked to the bone as Utena’s servant. I get that feeling; he liked to play adventures when we were young, too.

But I want to hurry up and go home, although I don’t really have a pressing reason why I want to go back to the days spent just being bored while watching the store, and going to school. At the very least, it was safe. I won’t be constantly put in situations where my life is on the line— just that fact alone made daily life feel like heaven. There isn’t anything really stimulating or fun about it, though...I just want to return to ordinary living, where I can go my entire life and not be involved in a single fire. I’m already really sick of it.

I finished changing. My old uniform took up too much space, so I threw it behind the register. Out of habit, though, I still had my apron on, and my bandana, too. Like this, the usual Denkiya Hitomi is complete. No matter how much my surroundings change, I’m still me.

Feeling somewhat relieved, I walked up to Kousuke. “Alright, I’m done. Um, so... Let’s go back to where Utena-san is, yeah?” I suggested.

“Go straight, and then left after you go around the coffee cups,” he instructed.

“You sound like a car GPS,” I told him. “Uhh, coffee cups...oh, you mean the name of the ride. Left there, right? Got it. Okay, let’s go, Kousuke.”

“I told you I’m not going,” he disagreed. “After that fire burns itself out I’m gonna go inspect it. At the very least, I want to find out why there was a fire in the first place. I’d like to avoid getting covered in soot from now on.” It was like Kousuke put down roots while he was sitting. Thinking he was hurt somewhere, I became worried. Or rather, I was a little lonely.

Utena and Torii were wearing the same uniform, but now that I think about it, they were basically complete strangers that I hadn’t had any contact with, up until now. Kousuke and I might have been estranged, but he was still my

childhood friend, and I knew what he was like. I felt like there wasn't much reason to part from Kousuke and go back to Utena and the others.

"What are you doing, Snail?" he asked. "If you're going, then hurry up and go. Although we should have a way to contact each other, just in case— there's no telling what might happen, after all. I'll want to be able to respond if you ever get into a pinch."

"Wouldn't it be fine if you just stayed together with us...? If you want to...explore? We can just do it together," I suggested. "And just send Utena-san and the others back first." I said it rather unenthusiastically, but inside I was just a little excited. That being said, I wasn't really that serious about it— Kousuke just made a curious face at me.

"For now, just take this smartbug with you," he told me. "This thing's learned my smell or something, so even if it goes somewhere far away it'll still come back." Saying that, Kousuke casually forced the creepy thing onto me. I'd rather not touch it, if possible.

"If something happens before you're able to escape, just let this thing fly," Kousuke told me one-sidedly. He picked up a nearby notebook, which had a full art cover from an anime nobody knew, along with an overly decorated pen, and handed them to me.

"It'll be like a carrier pigeon, although it's a bug," he admitted. "But with this, we can communicate. If you need me for something, just write it down and tie it to the smartbug. There'll be a bit of a time lag compared to just using actual smartphones, but it's better than walking around trying to find you every time. Here, put it in your pocket or something." He forced the smartbug and the other stuff down my pockets. While letting him do what he wanted, I meaninglessly patted his head a bit hard, like I was grinding it down.

"What the heck are you doing?" he demanded. "It's annoying, stop touching me so much."

"...nothing," I said innocently. "But isn't this smartbug, or whatever it is, important to you? You said it's got a lot of functions— is it really okay to be giving it to me?"

"It's not fine," he sighed, "but there's no other way around it, so just take it

and go. Kagamimori doesn't know the meaning of patience, so they might have moved already. Meet up with them properly and go back home."

"Kousuke, you'll come back too, won't you?" I asked, and after enjoying the feel of his hair for a while, I let go of his head. *We're not children anymore, so let's respect his will*, I decided. *If he wants to stay behind, let him, as long as he'll actually come back*. Kousuke's 'place to return to' doesn't even have to be me.

■CHANNEL26■

I left Kousuke at the gift shop, and trudged along by myself.

The amusement park has shut everything off by now. Earlier, the place was lit up bright enough to be somewhat blinding, but now the park has sunk into almost total darkness.

Looking back towards the merry-go-round, the fire seems to have already gone out, so even the brightness of that fire was gone. The place was so quiet I could hear the ringing in my ears, and there was nothing moving, either. There were no park staff, and of course, no customers around. It was like the end of the world, and people had gone extinct. I looked up at the sky and couldn't see any stars, either. Rather than saying it was a cloudy night, it was more like the stars just didn't exist.

It was dark, so all the buildings around me looked like ghosts and monsters: there was a roller coaster track that looked like a giant spine, or even a giant centipede. The Ferris wheel looked like a giant eyeball. The castle in the center of the amusement park, which used to be such an obvious presence, was now so wrapped in darkness that I couldn't see it.

Once again, I was reminded that I was in a very strange space, and wanting to hurry up and leave, I lengthened my stride a little.

I twisted my path around the kind-of-creepy coffee cups, which had lots of rainwater or something built up in them, as I walked. Just as Kousuke had said, from here I was in somewhat more familiar territory: there were the remains of the parliament building that had burnt down. The bench that Utena fell asleep

on should be a little bit away from here. Torii should be there, too.

I feel like I've been away for a long time, but in reality it should have been only about an hour. Although that, too, was a fairly long time. Whether or not they were worried about me, they would also probably be suspicious of where I had been, and I started thinking up excuses for why I had taken so long.

I had been entrusted with the locations of the exits along with a message, telling us to go home, from Kousuke. I should tell them that, lightly apologize for disappearing for so long, and take everyone in a group towards an exit. And then, this situation that's been nothing but a bad dream should end. I have no choice but to hope for that outcome.

Now that I think of it, I haven't seen Kurashima in a very long time— I'm actually worried. I hope he's alright, although he's just a stranger I met today. I've been visited by several fires; maybe he's encountered some terrible disasters, too.

Utena seemed to be devoted to Kurashima. It'll be trouble if she says something like, 'I won't leave unless it's with Yuudai-kun, let's go look for him.'

"Hm...?" I was late in realizing because I was thinking of nonsense as I walked, and also because it was hard to see in the dark. Although it wasn't like we had designated the spot as our meeting place, if they hadn't moved, Utena and Torii should have been on that bench. Near it, there was something large, which smelled raw.

Shivering, I was unable to move: there was a huge living thing, right next to the bench where Utena had fallen asleep. It was probably twice my height, and vertically very long and thin. Its surface had a bright, slimy sheen. A reptile, no, a fish— or no, it's probably an even lower life form.

It looked like a giant slug. No, it's more like a sea slug— I had a feeling that there was something just like this living in the ocean. It was clearly different from a land creature; it had a soft sort of fleshiness to it that seemed like it would be weak to force. It really is dark so that I can't quite tell, but it's strange how brightly colored the thing is. It would stand out quite a bit in the daytime.

There were little spots on its surface, and they would sometimes open and close. They were like the eyes of a lamprey— but behind such eerie things

weren't eyes, but some sort of screen. Is it similar to the smartbug, or that TV girl?

A mysterious, living thing fused with a screen. An unidentified monster.

It was crawling slowly and slimily over the ground. The trail it left behind consisted of some sort of strange mucus. It didn't make any cries or noises like an animal, so I was slow to notice. It was, apparently, heading for the bench.

Straining my eyes to look, I saw Utena and Torii still there; it looked like they were both asleep, without a care in the world. Utena was already asleep when I left, but Torii was asleep right next to her, too. She was hugging Utena close, as if to engulf the girl with her large body. Maybe she got sleepy and dozed off while she was waiting for me to return, because I was so late.

The merry-go-round that had been the scene of the fire was pretty close, and it should have made a large amount of noise— I guess they just didn't notice. They probably fell into a deep sleep because they were so tired from dealing with the consecutively strange situations we were being put in.

The two were cuddled together like parent and child, or at least like sisters. It was a heartwarming sight in one sense, but now was not the time to go soft like that.

"W-what should I do?" Caught up in the moment, I couldn't move. My first instinct was to dash over to the gift shop again and call Kousuke over, but the distance between us was fairly long. In the meantime, that slimy thing would probably have to time to get over to Utena and Torii. I'll just have to do something about it myself.

It was already right in front of me, although it was hard to tell which way was the front for that thing.

Just from sight, that thing was repulsive. It made me wonder if it was going to eat Utena and Torii. If that was the case, I had no time to leisurely call for help.

I considered raising my voice to wake them up, but what if the thing reacts badly to loud noises and goes berserk? I don't want to provoke it anymore than necessary.

Luckily, that weird thing moved slowly. I ran, trying to make as little noise as

possible. I'll get there before it does, and slap them awake. Then I'll take their hands and run. That's what I decided to do. If I was to prioritize my own safety, I should run away right now, but I couldn't just leave them. They were the same age as me, and we went to the same school.

I was neither good nor bad at athletics, but I ran. Luckily, I got to Utena and Torii before the thing displayed any reaction. I was a little out of breath, but I desperately shook them awake.

"Mmm, nn—" Utena woke up first. She spaced out, blinking several times. She got up, but she was still half asleep. Her long, dull brown hair stuck to her cheek. "What...Utena was having a good dream, too." Rubbing her eyes like an infant, she looked at me dubiously. She can't remember the situation she's in, apparently. She moved as if she was clearly bewildered and uneasy. "H-huh? This place— you, uhh, Hitomi? What's going— Hmm?"

"D-don't speak too loudly," I cautioned her. "We need to get away from here, slowly. I'll explain later. Torii-san, you wake up too." Whispering to them, I took the still sleeping Torii by the shoulder and shook her. It was going great up until this point, but right afterwards, my entire plan fell apart.

"Kyah—AAAAAAAAAAHHH?!" Utena noticed the slimy thing that was coming right for us, and screamed.

■CHANNEL27■

Using up all the air in her lungs, Utena raised a surprisingly loud scream. Even after she ran out of breath, she didn't stop making sounds. I felt her shrill, piercing voice up close and couldn't help but flinch, but at least even Torii couldn't stay asleep next to noise that was worse than an alarm clock's. She didn't seem to understand what was going on, either; she kept moving her eyes around in confusion. Torii was still hugging Utena, who was stretched out and stiff like she'd been convulsing, and batting her eyelashes in concern.

"U-Utena-chan?" she said. "What's wr— eh, huh?"

"Torii-san," I said hastily. "For now, let's just run." I couldn't wait for them to catch up to the situation, so I urged them to run. Taking their hands, I tried to

get them to stand up rather forcefully. But Utena looked to have half fainted—she didn't try to move on her own.

Well, anyone would go into shock if they woke up to a giant, grotesque slug right in front of them. It's not something proper ladies like Utena are used to seeing, either.

She seemed to have finally run out of oxygen, and started taking in deep breaths while still in a trance. And then, once again, she raised a scream that hurt my ears: "AAAAAAHHH! HYAAHHHHH?!"

Torii, who was absolutely calm compared to Utena, shook the girl who was still in her arms. Using a voice that was pretty loud for her, Torii tried to calm Utena down. "Utena-chan, calm down! Um, let's run away?"

"R-run, run you s— wait, Torii?! Why? Get away from me! Don't touch Utena, someone like you! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Wriggling, Utena used her small hands to push Torii away. She refused Torii with all her might, mustering up an unbelievable amount of power.

Torii stumbled backwards lightly, and fell off the bench. It happened before I could react, and I didn't move until I heard a large *thump* noise that sounded like it hurt.

"A-are you okay?" Supporting Torii by the shoulder, I helped her off the ground she'd fallen on.

Utena alternated between glaring at us, and then the giant slug. And then, crying enough to make me think it was fake, like a small animal, she ran off just like that. "Lies! I hate this!" she shrieked. "This dream! Why, why does Utena have to suffer through this?! AAAAHHH!?" Crawling on the ground, even going so far as to scrape her knees on the ground hard enough to draw blood— Utena put distance between her and both us and the strange thing, screaming all the while. "Hiii! EEEE! AAAAAHHHH!?"

What should I do? I thought once again. Utena's clearly confused. This reaction was natural, but it would be hard to calm her down and get her to run away with us in this condition.

At this rate, it would have been easier to let her keep sleeping and just carry

her away. There's no time for regrets, though, because that strange thing is still unflappably coming closer.

We have to run.

"L-let's run away for now," I suggested, "Quickly!" I know that my teeth are chattering and I'm shaking in my boots. I'm scared, too; unlike Kousuke, I don't want to be a hero. There's no way I could fight a monster, and I would never want to, anyway. We have to run. I shake Torii, who was unmoving, as though she was stricken with grief.

"Stand up! Run! Hurry up, Torii-san!" I screamed at her like a child throwing a fit for a toy. Torii came to with a gasp, and nodded. I helped her up.

"Umm... That, Denkiya...san. Where did you go?" she asked. "Was I asleep?" Torii was tall enough that, when she stood, I had to look up at her. Whether it was because she still felt like she was seeing a dream, or that emotions just don't show on her face, she didn't seem too disturbed by this situation. She was spacing out, before finally noticing the slug thing that was this close to us and she looked up. "W-what, is that?" she groaned in a quiet voice. I guess she wasn't completely calm; she was probably just in a daze because she couldn't understand the situation.

Forcefully, I took her by the hand and dragged her in the opposite direction of the slug. "It's fine," I told her. "Let's get out of here, together!"

"Y-yeah," she agreed. "Utena-chan— We need to get Utena-chan, too." Torii motioned to Utena to come over, but the girl had completely fallen into a panic. She just kept shaking her head, turning her back on us like she was rejecting the entire world. Somehow standing up, she tried to go off somewhere, but quickly tripped on her own legs. She was like a small animal that had its nest invaded, or a bird acting out in its cage.

The giant slug, reacting to her large and violent movements, headed towards her. Slowly but steadily, it crawled closer. That's bad; it looks like it's completely locked on to Utena.

"S-stay away! No! Am I going to get eaten? I'm scared! Papa! Help me! NOOOOO!?" Utena started to sob, as if she'd regressed to infancy. She curled up on the floor, with her head in her hands, of all things. Does she think if she

stays curled up like that the danger will just pass on it's own, or maybe that someone will just pluck her out of it? Her hips might have just given out, too.

Seeing that, Torii shook off my hand... And with a strong gait that was just a little unexpected, she ran towards Utena.

"T-Torii-san?" I called out to her, but there was no response. She just went to Utena, entranced. *Why?* I wondered. *I thought Utena was bullying her?* It's like she's trying to save Utena. This *is* an emergency. Maybe she just couldn't leave her to get attacked by that thing?

Ashamed that I couldn't move like Torii did, I chased after her. Every once in a while, screens buried all over the surface of the slug peeked out, and I got a feeling they were looking at me. It was creepy and scary, and it made it hard to breathe.

I couldn't think, either— yet even so, the situation changed drastically right after. Torii, who was running right in front of me, was blown sideways; for an instant, I thought that she'd disappeared. It was basically like teleportation, and it was so sudden that I couldn't even be surprised.

■CHANNEL28■

"Eh—" On the opposite side of Torii, whose large back had obscured my vision, Utena rounded her eyes in surprise as well.

"Uhhh, what just happened? Where did Torii-san...go...?" I had nothing but questions, but I couldn't stop so suddenly, and I followed my momentum to reach Utena. Reflexively I picked her up in my arms, and then I looked back.

"Hitomi! Hitomi, right? I can call you that? It's scary, I'm scared! Save Utena!!" She must have felt willing to cling onto straw at this point, because Utena latched onto me, too. She was just a small girl, younger than me, with a burningly high body temperature. Her face was pitifully stained and messy with tears.

"Hitomi, that! Look, what the heck is that?!" From inside my arms, Utena squeezed out another shout. I fearfully followed her gaze. What's going on now, on top of everything else? Can't the world give me a break?

Turning back, the strange creatures had multiplied. This one looked like a giant monkey. It's still too dark, so I can't say for sure, but it looked like its entire body was covered in lead-colored fur. It almost looked like an extremely muscular human; a man. But there's no person this unnaturally large, it's not a primitive human, either— nobody would have *fur*, especially not this thick.

The fur looked like it was undulating, and somehow even seemed noble, like a large dog of high pedigree.

Reaching from its chest to its head, there was a long, vertical screen implanted in it. Because of that inexplicable accessory, this monkey-like creature's silhouette had been warped, as if its upper half had been forcibly caved in by a TV. But it was moving and lively, in a bizarre sort of way. It looked like it was CG, made for a foreign film with a big budget.

Apparently this thing, which had just suddenly appeared, punched Torii aside on the way in, or something similar. Using the momentum from its outstretched fist, it spun around several times. The wind pressure it gave off fluttered my hair.

“Torii-san—” I looked around in the darkness, and found Torii. Just as I thought, she had been punched by the new creature, and she slid and rolled on the ground quite a ways away. Crashing into several lined up mercury lamps, she finally stopped, and didn't move.

She had collapsed face up. There was so much blood coming out of her face that it made me shiver. Her right arm, which is what the giant monkey's fist must have impacted, was broken. The bone must have snapped in two— taking such large damage all at once, she must have fainted. *No, she might also be dead.* I shivered as that thought ran through my head.

Do people die this quickly? No, she's not dead for sure yet... Scolding my trembling feet, I tried to go over to Torii, but there was something that moved before me.

It was that monkey-creature, which went towards the collapsed Torii without mercy. Compared to the giant slug, its movements were alarmingly agile. It reached Torii before I could blink, and grabbed her in its hand. It raised her high like a spoil of war.

The monkey let out a roar, or a victory cry, that hurt my ears. Was that how a giant monkey sounded? This thing didn't have anything approaching a mouth. Instead, it had an angry emoji on its screen as it blasted sound like it had speakers.

It was too much for me. I could only stand, confused and staring, unable to comprehend the scene laid out in front of me.

This is bad. I have to move. Torii's in danger, she'll be killed— I can only see her being eaten. But I couldn't move— I was scared and unwilling, and I could only shake in confusion.

Kousuke. The name of my childhood friend passed through my mind, but I couldn't even call for help.

Right in front of my eyes, I could feel the monkey-thing putting power into its grip. I didn't want to hear the sound of bones breaking. While bleeding, Torii convulsed unnaturally, before quickly becoming still.

"Stop!" Utena yelled, while scratching at her own cheeks. "Please stop—" It probably wasn't reacting to Utena's words, but the monkey creature unceremoniously threw Torii away. Every time she bounced on the ground, fresh blood sprayed.

I think I might just ball up, close my eyes and plug my ears. I could not imagine there was a chance that she'd lived through that. Torii looked like she'd been run over by a car— I couldn't even confirm her death.

Shadows fell upon our surroundings. Looking up, I saw that the giant slug, which had been closing in on us slowly the entire time, was right behind us. Dripping its disgusting mucus, it wet our skin.

I wasn't even allowed to be dumbfounded; Utena had already lost her senses crying. So biting my tongue, I grabbed on to her hand and pulled her along. I have no idea how I'm moving, myself— I ran like a broken puppet. I got away from the slug. If we don't move, we'll end up like Torii... That fear alone moved my body without speaking, just breathing in and out. Moving my hands and feet, I just ran until, feeling resistance, I pitched forward.

"Torii! Is she dead? No, no more! Why?! What the hell is happening?!"

Screaming, Utena tried to head over to Torii. I could just let her go and run away myself, I really did think about doing that, but...I was gripping too hard. Our hands were entwined like glue, and wouldn't let go.

With no other choice, I ran with her, straight forward, towards Torii.

The giant monkey passed right beside us. For a moment, I felt like I was dead, but it looked like the monkey had set its sights on the giant slug, and it leapt that way instead. In opposition to the roar made by the raging monkey, the slug raised a ghastly cry, like cloth tearing. Too afraid, I couldn't even bring myself to look that way. I have no idea what's what— both Utena and I reached Torii's side together.

Crouching down, I looked at Torii. From up close, she really was in an awful state. She was covered in blood— and that blood completely absorbed the darkness, making her look ominously black. Her broken bones poked through her skin, exposed to the outside. I felt a pulse when I touched her, but I could not imagine she was going to stay that way very long. She didn't move a muscle.

I got the shivers. Even in this dimension, we'll probably die if we're killed.

"Hitomi, please," Utena begged. "Help me, let's carry Torii to a doctor— oh, there isn't one, is there... But we have to get her out of here. At least to somewhere safe, yeah, Hitomi?" Urged on by Utena as she pulled on my clothes, we somehow managed to pick Torii up. I held on to her legs, and Utena had her by the armpits. She was heavier than I thought— but I want to get out of here as soon as possible. I didn't even have any time to wonder why this happened.

"Let's go, let's go! Hurry, to anywhere! I hate it here, Utena hates it here— hey, Hitomi? Are you listening? Put more power into it, please! She's too heavy for Utena to carry alooone!" Utena's voice sounded like a broken gramophone. Fixing my grip on her legs, we kept running with our burden. *You're profoundly heavy, Torii*, I thought. I want to throw it all away, this ambiguous situation—

The giant monsters are probably still fighting behind us, ignoring whatever we're doing. I can still hear the unbearable noises they're making. What the hell is going on? I really don't understand.

I felt a gaze on me, and looked around. *Is someone watching me?* I wondered.

I'm not sure—

Hey, please, don't just watch; help me out, here.

■ECHO7■

Sayuri was dreaming a dream of the distant past. This was an unusual thing. Living in the mountains was fairly harsh: working yourself to exhaustion before going home to fall asleep so deeply you didn't have any dreams was a daily occurrence. Not to mention, Sayuri didn't even want to remember her past.

It might be because these days she's been worried about something. Disturbed, she's running from reality into dreams, even though there's nowhere to run, both in her dreams and in reality.

“～.....♪” It was a memory from a long time ago; more than ten years in the past. That's why the details were vague and blurry, and it was mixed in with some other memories— it was a very unclear dream.

Sayuri, still in her teens, was in an amusement park. It was the first time in her life she'd been to a place like this, so Sayuri was excited. It was fun and rare and she couldn't wait, she expressed her high spirits.

She was a girl. That being said, Sayuri was not one to naturally be charming. Unless someone was already quite close to her, they wouldn't know that she was so giddy. She looked standoffish, with pouting lips, as she sat and fidgeted on one of the many benches placed around the park. Her attitude would usually make one think that she was angry.

“.....♪” She wore baggy clothes that hid the lines of her body, as well as uncute gloves and boots that eschewed all form in favor of function. She also had on a pair of tinted glasses that didn't suit her, and a knit cap that completely covered her black hair, which was a source of pride for her. As a sign of the season, she had a mask on to defend against the cold weather; it wouldn't be good if she hurt her throat.

She was clearly trying to disguise herself, but she looked more like a believer in some shady foreign religion. She had little interest in fashion, and thus was similarly indifferent to her own outward appearance.

Sayuri was a heavy smoker in those days, but she was also trying to quit at that moment so she was chewing on some sweet gum to deceive her lonely

mouth. She would put in more gum as soon as it lost its flavor, so the ball in her mouth had grown to a fairly considerable size. She was past the point of not being able to speak, and it was getting hard to breathe.

“.....♪” Chewing the gum for a long time had left her jaw tired, so now she was just rolling the gum ball around in her mouth like a piece of hard candy. The flavor ran out, so she reached into her pocket to try and fish out another piece of gum. Her search was not proving to be fruitful. Because of the gloves, she couldn’t feel around accurately for the gum with her fingers. Growing more and more annoyed, her already naturally sharp eyes started to look even more dangerous.

“I’m gonna burn my house down into an ugly black—” A singing voice came into her head unexpectedly, and gave Sayuri a start. Ceasing the search for her gum, Sayuri rubbed at her ear. The English was too hard for Sayuri, who was uneducated in that respect, so she didn’t know what was being said, but she *did* feel the eeriness. It resembled a scream.

For a while now, Sayuri had been listening to music from a portable CD player in the chest pocket of her overcoat (there was nothing small and fashionable like iPods or smartphones at the time) connected to a pair of earphones in her ears. That was also part of Sayuri’s job.

She didn’t particularly like music or songs, but wearing earphones and making it look like she was socially isolated prevented people from coming up and talking to her. It was a pretty convenient tool for Sayuri, who viewed communication as an annoyance. She was getting paid for this, too— listening to songs from various artists, and giving her impressions. Although the most she ever said was stuff like, “It was good,” or, “I hated it,” or at the very least, “I listened to it,” just those few words from Sayuri would set quite a few things in motion.

She could bend others’ jobs, lives, and futures for her own benefit. That would be somewhat scary, but it wasn’t at a level she would feel directly, so she was just a girl who knew nothing. Even now, she was doing nothing but listening to countless CDs with songs by artists unknown to her burned into them, clearing her workload in order from top to bottom.

This CD is a bust, thought Sayuri. There were too many ballads with calm melodies, and she didn't really like those. "I like you." "I love you." "Love is wonderful." The artist just repeated those lyrics. It was so repetitive that it started turning into some animal's cry for her, before finally ending up as just some meaningless beeping sound in her ear.

It's not like she had no interest in love, but in the end this was just someone else's feelings of love, and Sayuri couldn't empathize. To Sayuri, love was a more animalistic thing, like an instinct. If love gets too dramatically embellished, it actually starts to smell like lies— that's why she was getting pretty tired of it — when, suddenly, that discomfoting song started playing.

Did the person in charge of burning this CD put it in by accident, Sayuri wondered, and forget to fix his mistake? It started playing in a pretty half-assed spot, mixed in like white noise. The feel of this song was clearly different from the rest. That's why she was surprised.

For a while there were no voices, just a melancholy melody, so she had completely thought it was just that kind of a song. Or, possibly, it was an instrumental version of another song. But apparently, it was just a long interlude. **"I'm gonna run away now and never look back"** The high pitched voice, which seemed to belong to a charming girl, shook Sayuri's eardrums with English, from which she was unable to derive any meaning. So instead, she just strained her ears and listened.

Her heart beat fast, although she'd felt nothing at the several saccharine love-themed songs that came before. She wasn't exactly all aflutter. If Sayuri was pressed to put a name to the feelings that welled up in her chest, it would be fear.

It felt like a nail had been put in her core, or as if it had been stabbed by a blade, which was then twisted around. Her surroundings suddenly went distant. Unable to stand her unease, Sayuri looked around. She saw an extravagant amusement park, one of the most prominent in Japan. She saw an unbelievably large crowd for a weekday. And in the middle of that crowd, on an unpopular bench was Sayuri, sitting like she was separated from the world, and trembling.

What the hell is this? she wondered, *This tune, this song?* It was doubtful that

this was sung by a real human.

“AND NEVER LOOK BACK—” The lyrics were emphasized clearly, the volume rose, and Sayuri felt like a blow had been dealt to her body. She desperately tried to translate the lyrics and gain some peace of mind. The unknown is a scary thing— but Sayuri was abysmal at studying, and the English just sounded like nonsense to her.

***BACK?** Bakk— a bag? ‘Behind?’ I know ‘Look,’ it’s the name of a brand of chocolate— no wait, was it ‘to look?’ Look behind you?* She turned around. A man stood there.

■ECHO8■

“Fwah—” That was the timing for a monster to appear in horror films, so Sayuri almost let out a scream, but it was someone familiar to her, so she actually felt relief. Fixing her posture, Sayuri took out her earphones. The music, and the fear, went distant.

“N, mmgh” Startled, her voice didn’t come out properly. Her mouth was also full of gum.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Sayuri wanted to take a look at the playlist of the CD she was just listening to, so she tried to find the terminal attached to her portable CD player (it was just a small accessory that listed all the song names). But, of course, the gloves were in her way, and she couldn’t find it.

Seeing Sayuri move around meaninglessly, the man tilted his head in confusion. “What are you doing, Sayuri?”

Being asked that, Sayuri lowered the mask and spat out the giant wad of gum. Balling it up, she threw it into a nearby silver trash can. She looked up at the fairly tall man from her position, cross-legged on the bench. “I was listening to music,” she explained.

“I can see that,” he answered. “Would you like to go ride something?”

“Do you have one you wanna ride?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Personally I want to go home already. Diving into the midst of

this huge crowd of people, you don't understand your own position. I'm glad that we've gotten to meet again after so long, though."

"Sorry for calling you, even though it's so far away." Filling in the conversation where appropriate, Sayuri grew a bit lonesome.

He felt distant. Even though she'd known him since they were children, running around on grass fields, and waving sticks around. But both of them had put on years, and built up social fetters called positions— they were no longer able to meet as they pleased.

Adulthood isn't something people should aspire to. Well, Sayuri was still at an age where society could argue that she was still a child. But she had a job, and was a functioning member of society, and was at an age where she would be disgruntled at being treated like a child.

Her childhood friend, who used to be just a snot-nosed kid, was wearing a suit even in the middle of an amusement park, and trying to look serious. Solemn and expressionless, he was looking down at her, sitting on the bench.

Was this how he normally looked? She was staring at him. The man was squirming and grumbling like he hated it.

"I'll be in trouble if you keep calling me out so lightheartedly, though," he said.

"Was I being a bother?" she wanted to know.

"No, the situation over there is looking to be more annoying..." he explained. "Why an amusement park? Why couldn't we just talk over the phone like normal people, is this really something you have to say in person?"

"They built a new amusement park in this neighborhood. It's pretty much the same as this one. The place was called Shi-something, that's why I thought this place would be more free," Sayuri explained. "That didn't turn out to be true, but I've still never been to an amusement park. Are you not having fun?"

"As always," he commented, "you're terrible at talking, Sayuri. I have no idea what you're trying to say."

"Um, you see..." She was aware of how bad she was at talking. Reflecting on

that, Sayuri listed all the main points of what she wanted to say in her head. It somehow felt like she was being lectured, so she found it hard to speak.

There's something that she had to tell him. "Um, I'm sorry, but... It looks like I'm pregnant, with your child." Caressing her belly, Sayuri said that blankly. "Want to get married?"

As soon as she asked that, she got strangled. Sayuri was bewildered; she hadn't expected that to happen at all. It was painful. It hurt, and she could hear the bones in her neck creak. She wondered why? She had thought he would be at least a little happy.

Sayuri put up too little resistance, and the man started feeling a little ashamed. The power in his hands weakened. And then, abruptly, he backed away from her, as if he had become scared. His fingertips went away.

Coughing, Sayuri finally understood. As she thought, this wasn't love. That's why she could never empathize with all the love songs she'd had to listen to.

She was born in a boring town. It was a remote, rural town where everything felt like it was just rotting away slowly. Sayuri was convinced she would walk through life without any major ups and downs. Without anything of particular interest happening, like her mother and father, and their mothers and fathers before them.

Sayuri expected to live like the many people around her that lived in the same town. Forever settled into their remote countryside, and letting the days pass by with indifference until they were old and dried up, and eventually dying. And then her bones would be buried in town, and she would be forgotten forever.

She didn't really have a problem with that, because this wasn't a fairy tale; she'd never wanted a life that was stormy and full of drama. Sayuri had never hoped for this, but one day her life had suddenly changed.

Someone, from a TV station in some city, came to visit the town Sayuri lived in. Whether it was for a travel show or a movie, she wasn't sure. Her classmates were all excited over the unusual and unexpectedly abnormal situation.

Sayuri, herself, didn't particularly care, because in the end, nothing would

change. There's no way everything would suddenly change over this, as if one were switching channels on a TV. Getting excited and making a fuss will only lead to being tired.

But if one doesn't socialize at least a reasonable amount, they wouldn't be able to live in the sticks, so going along with everyone else, she headed for the rubberneckers. They had all come to stare at these rare people, who were from the outside, for fun.

And then, Sayuri got scouted. The camera had just coincidentally caught a glimpse of her, and it was pure luck that the man from the station had brought that back... As to what had happened, she wasn't sure of the exact details, but some bigwig from the station had set his eyes on Sayuri.

"You're a treasure," he'd said. "You shouldn't be allowed to sputter out in this backwater. Won't you please come to the city? Let me be your agent." With words like these, Sayuri was taken to the city.

Sayuri was simply obeying the flow. Both her parents cheered her on, and it had seemed as though the entire town had gathered together to give her a push forward. They hoped for her to be a force for change, a bridge between the city and their rural town, which was gradually getting even more rustic.

She caught the eyes of one person, and was saved from a boring life in the country. Sayuri knew what her classmates thought of that: jealousy, envy, and other muddy emotions were all pointed at her... Sayuri's choices had all been taken from her, and in reality, it was a huge annoyance.

Sayuri had lived an indifferent, ordinary, daily life: Helping around the house, working at a store, stocking shelves, and taking calls... Having trifling conversations with the occasional window shopper. Those days crumbled in the blink of an eye.

Under the all-out production efforts of the TV station, Sayuri became an idol. Her style of living, her entire life, changed all at once, and she could no longer go back.

She had no idea what was what, but no one would give her, Sayuri, the answers or the peace of mind she wanted.

■ECHO9■

In the past, there was an Idol whose stage name did not sound like a real person's: Hanemori Joururi. She was a legendary idol, who dominated a generation. When she sang, she could fill the Budoukan or sweep the Oricon charts. She was the subject of everyone's gossip.

People all over Japan saw Hanemori Joururi: they talked about her, gave her attention, and loved her. She was a social phenomenon. That might be why she was the last idol to shake the world by herself.

The turnover of generations accelerated, and idols were mass produced without end. In this generation, where so many idols debut and then disappear that it would be impossible to remember all their names, no idol would be able to stand out on her own. On top of it sounding bad to call them inferior copies, it would not be completely correct. And so, Hanemori Joururi was the last Super Idol, which was an idol of an older sort, close to being a historical figure.

There was no longer any space in show business for such an antiquated existence. For show business, rather than holding up a single generation's super idol, there was more profit in systematizing idols, constantly spawning top idols to pull along a generation. That way would be able to reap profits at any time, in any era.

The method of manually building up an idol, bit by bit, was already a thing of the past. Certainly, doing such manual labor could miraculously turn out a masterpiece that would be left in history. Just like, for example, Hanemori Joururi. But management couldn't rely on such miracles or coincidence. It was better to mass produce goods that were cheaper, and could reliably bring in reasonable amounts of income. That was the modern standard. Rather than a work of art molded carefully by a potter pouring out his soul, factory-made mass produced products, which could be found in a convenience store or a hundred yen shop, were more sought after.

Undergoing industrialization and mechanization, the world of show business became a systematic business. Current idols were born in a factory. Inheriting that system, enhancing and improving upon it, there would be no possibility of a special work of art, a Super Idol, being born that way. No one was looking for

one either; not a misshapen life form like that— an untameable monster.

As an inevitability of capitalism, as a request, such a generation took shape. One could even say it was dangerous to rely on a work of art, or a lone genius, because if she breaks, everything fails. In reality, Hanemori Joururi fell from grace due to an insignificant scandal, and the world of show business went through hell trying to fill that hole.

The modern day had probably been shaped by echoes of that past. Without relying on a single person, with everyone supporting and building up one another, walking along a sound and gentle, evenly paved road. That was probably the correct decision. The current world of show business— the idol industry— had developed and was many times, tens of times larger in scope than when Hanemori Joururi had been active.

The sun that was Super Idols had set, and everyone forgot about Hanemori Joururi. Times change, and remnants of the past get buried in the earth where no one would be able to look back at them. Sayuri, too, had almost completely forgotten the name Hanemori Joururi. Like thinking, *Ohhh, that person did exist, didn't they?* It was someone else's affair. Most young kids these days probably don't know the name of Hanemori Joururi; she was a person of the past, a character in a story that had ended long ago.

And yet, why was that name echoing now, of all times? Hanemori Joururi died.

“Mmnnn—” Sayuri gently opened her eyes. Apparently, she had nodded off, and had an unpleasant dream of the past— a man, whom she had sort of loved, strangled her when she told him she was pregnant with his child. Rejected, she was dejected. It could be said that she was lucky that the dream ended there, as the continuation was a string of incidents that would make her pretty depressed.

Sayuri had fallen asleep on a coffee table she kept to use when writing; it was placed along a wall in her small mountain cabin. She was in the middle of writing her usual report on the results of her fixed-point observations.

She'd always been bad at using her head, and after thinking hard about various things while writing the document, her tired brain must have let go of

its consciousness. She had taken a nap, and she wasn't even an infant or an old woman. Yawning, Sayuri stretched like a cat. Her back was stiff, maybe because she fell asleep sitting. Rubbing her eyes, she heard something fall with a *thump*.

Startled, she looked over at the source of the noise and found a blanket. Apparently, in order to prevent Sayuri from getting too cold, it seemed that her daughter had put a blanket on her. She surprised herself a little with how happy she was at this gesture.

Sayuri grinned. Although it's a bit late, recently, her daughter had been incredibly cute.

Well, it would have been better if she had woken Sayuri up instead of putting a blanket on her— she was in the middle of work, after all. Looking at the clock, Sayuri saw that she'd been sleeping a long time. She'd missed the timing to make dinner.

Sayuri wondered if her daughter was hungry. Thinking that, she looked around the room, but there was no sign of her daughter. It was a fairly confined cabin; if she wasn't anywhere in sight, her daughter was probably outside.

Maybe she was out in the field again, watching that strange TV. That thing that resembled a pagan altar was creepy enough that Sayuri wanted it removed, though. Her daughter would probably hate that. It was apparent that she had really come to like the thing.

"Hyah!?" In the quiet cabin, a huge, piercing sound was suddenly heard, taking Sayuri aback. Nervously looking for the origin of the sound, Sayuri found it was the landline placed near the window. Tentatively, this cabin had a telephone line running to it, and Sayuri used it to take care of her business whenever she found it too annoying to go all the way to town. Sayuri didn't have many acquaintances, so the phone very rarely rang.

What is it? Sayuri wondered. With her heart beating rapidly, Sayuri crawled to the phone, because she thought standing would be too troublesome. The remains of her daughter's kindness— the blanket— had tangled around her legs and made it extremely hard to move.

She picked up the phone without checking the caller's number. "Hello," she asked, "who is it?"

It appeared that her daughter was dead, or so Sayuri was told over the phone.



Chapter 4

A news channel that broadcasts the comedies
and tragedies of some far off world

■CHANNEL29■

It was morning. The sky, which was pitch-black, slowly started to grow brighter.

I'm usually quite fast at waking up, but today I just couldn't find it in me. Was it because of the makeshift bed that had somehow been cobbled together out of a large amount of uniforms and towels?

Probably not the only reason, because I was still in the amusement park. This was an alternate dimension, right? It would've been nice if all my problems had resolved themselves while I was sleeping.

Yawning, I drew air into my lungs in order to gain energy, but I don't have the will to start moving. Between muscle aches, small scratches and abrasions, and burns, my entire body is throbbing in pain. Blearily wrenching my eyes open, I saw a geometrical decoration hanging off the ceiling. Around me were shelves filled with junk.

This was the amusement park's gift shop. The lights in the building turned on automatically, and it became bright enough that I could no longer stay asleep. I got up with a groan.

I was in a gloomy mood. Really, I just want to scream. Last night, we were attacked by strange monsters; a monkey and a slug that had combined with some sort of screen. We barely managed to escape from those ominous things with our lives.

Letting the smartbug fly, I had contacted Kousuke, although the note I had attached to it was nearly incoherent. My handwriting was bad enough that I wasn't sure he'd actually be able to read it. Upon reading the note, Kousuke rushed over and led us to the gift shop.

He also carried Torii, who was in tatters. He even helped give her first aid, although there was no kit, so Kousuke was only able to give her stop-gap treatment. Using torn clothes as bandages, he attached her broken arm to a splint, as well as bandaging her head wounds. Kousuke even went as far as to go to a control room shower to get water so he could clean her wounds, even if

he wouldn't have wanted to, given what happened earlier.

His gallant treatment had some effect, as he managed to keep Torii alive. But she was still gravely wounded, and would need to get treated at a hospital by a doctor as soon as possible. But there's no way to do that in this dimension, so we still have to leave quickly.

"Denkiya...san. Are you...awake?" Hearing a small voice that felt like it could disappear at any moment, I turned.

Bedding had been made from a bunch of uniforms piled high. Kousuke was considerate and made the bedding, thinking it would be better than sleeping on the bare floor or the ground. All three of us— Torii, Utena, and I— slept on it. Kousuke was probably outside; he'd said that he would keep watch.

Apparently, I was the last one to wake up. I didn't see Kousuke or Utena, but right next to me lay Torii, who couldn't move on her own and so lay face up on the bedding.

Looking at her again, I could see her wounds, which were so severe I didn't want to look at them. She didn't have anything else to wear, so she was still in her uniform, and she had towels wrapped around her here and there in place of bandages. They were soaked through with blood, and she looked pitiful.

Her right arm was in a splint, and also wrapped tight in towels so that she wouldn't move it. We wiped her body down with a wet towel, though, so at least she looked clean. I could smell blood even from where I was.

"Good morning," I greeted her. If I asked her not to call me Denkiya, it would probably only waste her stamina with needless conversation. I straightened out my hair, which had gotten mussed up while I was sleeping, with my fingers.

"Are you alright? Torii-san...I'm so happy you're still alive," I told her. "I was worried, you know? It looked to me like you really died last night."

"Yeah. I'm alright, just barely." Shrinking back, Torii wriggled her wound-covered body in embarrassment.

"Mishiro-kun...gave me first aid, so... He's a really...reliable person." Hearing her call my childhood friend with affection caused my chest to twinge in pain a little, so I put my focus into fixing my uniform. As one would expect, wearing a

uniform as is would not make for good sleep. So when sleeping, I loosened it up a little by opening a few buttons, among other things.

Torii must have thought she shouldn't watch me fix my clothes, so she shifted and turned over slightly, taking care to not move her broken arm. Turning her face away, she sighed heavily. "Sorry."

I was perplexed, what was she apologizing for? "Kousuke was the one who basically did all of the work giving you first aid," I told her. "Kagamimori-san and I just did whatever small bits we could, basically. So, save your 'sorrys' and 'thank yous' for him, okay? ...Are you...friends with him?"

"He's a kind person, he is," Torii said. "It looks like he's always concerned about me."

"Hmm, is that so?" I was thoughtful. "So Kousuke's nice to you."

"I think he's nice to everyone— wait, Denkiya-san, do you know Mishiro-kun?" Torii asked.

"Did I not tell you?" I said apologetically. "We're childhood friends. I couldn't get rid of him, even if I wanted to. We haven't talked to each other at all recently, though. I never thought we'd wind up in the same weird place together."

"I wonder what this place is, this...amusement park." Because of the long conversation, Torii started to painfully breathe shallowly. "It's like...I'm having a bad dream. If I'm going to dream anyway, I wanted it to be a good one..." Her speech started sounding like she was delirious. She's hurt, I shouldn't let her talk too much. Ashamed at my lack of awareness, I stood up, seeing as how I'd finished putting on the uniform, anyway.

I put on my apron and the bandana, too. With this, hopefully I've become my usual self. "Umm... Do you know where the others are? I'll go say good morning — or should I stay here and take care of you, Torii-san?"

"No, it's fine. You're a nice person too, Denkiya-san." Torii smiled gently. She looked kind of like a saint, even though, at school, she's being bullied and ostracized. There was no shabbiness or pitifulness to her, to the point where it was a little irritating.

Maybe I was also one of the people looking down on her secretly in my heart, thinking her inferior and pitiful. Even so, she was treated nicely by Kousuke... *Is this jealousy?* I wondered.

“Late last night, Kurashima-san came back all of a sudden. So, Mishiro-kun, he...left somewhere, like they were switching out,” Torii explained. “He said he would do something, investigate? That’s what Kurashima-san said— I was sleeping at the time, so they told me after.”

He does like to investigate, that wannabe hero. I wasn’t...satisfied that he’d left a wounded person and me alone to go off doing whatever he wanted. I also felt a little lonely, and I pouted my lips.

Actually, why does Kousuke always try to go off on his own given the slightest opportunity? Was he really just that uncooperative? While I was thinking those thoughts, I also reacted to a name I hadn’t heard in a while. “Kurashima-san?” I questioned. “So he returned? Where was he, and what was he doing?”

“No idea...” Torii trailed off. “You should go ask him, he should be standing watch just outside. Utena-chan is probably with him, too.” Saying that, Torii closed her eyes.

Thinking that we shouldn’t allow her to get cold, I gently placed towels and uniforms on her, like a blanket. This is about all I could do for her. I thought I should do it, so I did. Ah, all I’m doing is going with the flow.

At the end, just once, I softly caressed her head. I did feel that that was too friendly, though. It was like she was a baby.

“Please rest,” I told her. “I’ll come back soon, let’s get out of here together.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Thank you, kind one—”

Those were the last words I ever spoke to Torii.

■CHANNEL30■

Dawn was approaching in the amusement park, and the place suddenly became lively.

Even so, it probably wasn’t normal operating hours yet. The crowds of people

with unrecognizable faces weren't around yet. What looked like pure white arms— I couldn't see them too well in the morning light— started popping up here and there, doing things like wiping down the walls of buildings, and painting things white.

Morning cleaning and maintenance, was the impression I got. I still don't understand the true nature of this strange amusement park even now, though. It would be hard to even guess at. It seemed like there was a schedule, and everything was moving according to that.

Amusement parks are meant to entertain their customers. But in that case, who was this place meant to entertain? At the very least, I'm having no fun at all here.

I want to be home already. Yesterday, I only felt this vaguely. But now, that feeling has become an urgent desire. I want to return to my world, which was boring but peaceful. I can't sleep well in this dimension.

Sounds similar to construction resounded. Looking towards them, the things that had burnt down yesterday, the parliament building and the merry-go-round, were being removed. The hard-to-see white arms also had a hand in this, lifting up rubble into the sky.

At the same time, something that looked like a white ants' nest, or clay, came up from the ground. The fingers on the white arms kneaded it, making it start to take shape. Are they building a new building or attraction?

Those giant arms...if the black ones I saw yesterday are the same as the white ones I see now, then... They seem to be rough things, and it doesn't look like they're able to recognize us. If we were to be recognized as something foreign to this amusement park, as trash, I don't think we could avoid getting removed.

After all, yesterday I too was taken along with a bunch of TVs, and was carelessly dropped by them... Let's be careful not to get near those white arms. Anything could happen at any time in this dimension; we were living next to death. I'll have to protect myself.

Only now do I realize how safe life in the country was, the daily life that I casually enjoyed. Humans, advanced in the fields of science and civilization, making towns and laws... In order to protect ourselves, we built up history,

structure, and culture. I realized that.

I can feel that this is a place outside of human history. It's just like the deep mountains, or the ocean floor. No, it's just like the surface of the moon; this is an extremely dangerous wilderness, where no one will protect you.

This place is raw nature, where human lives can be blown away easily. This is terrible. I got the chills, and wrapped my arms around myself.

"Ummm—" Torii told me that Utena and Kurashima would be right outside the gift shop, but they aren't here. Not having lookouts is a problem; Torii and I were sleeping defenselessly inside just a moment ago.

If there had been another fire, the both of us would have been goners. Where could Utena and the others be and what could they even be doing there, I wonder... Angry, I looked around randomly.

Right away, I saw two of the missing people. Utena and Kurashima were on the opposite side of the gift shop, in a small but tasteful building. Like something built by three little pigs, it was a messy patchwork of brick, wood, and straw. The roof was the color of cheap toothpaste.

The place had a sign, but as usual, it was written in either a foreign language, or some other unknown language to me, and I couldn't read it. Through the cleanly polished windowsill, I could see the two of them having a friendly chat.

I guess that building is a restaurant, because the two of them were eating. Pastel colored marshmallows were piled on a ceramic plate, and I could see them throw one into their mouths occasionally. It looked like they were having a date, so it was hard to interrupt them, but...

"Heeyy!" Calling out to them, I walk over. It didn't look like they'd heard me, so I opened the double doors. I stepped inside the building, or the store, as I'll call it.

"Ah, Hitomi! Morning, look who's an over-sleeper!" Utena noticed me immediately, and she waved her hand to call me over.

She was incredibly confused last night, though. Either Kurashima had calmed her down, or she's just not the type to dwell on one emotion for too long. Either way, Utena's expression was bright and cheerful. Wiping off the crumbs

around her mouth with the back of her hand, she motioned me over.

“Here, sit. We have food,” she offered generously. “You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Now that she said it, I barely ate anything yesterday. I only snacked a bit while we were inside that parliament building, or whatever it was.

“Ha... Um, good morning.” Greeting them while sounding a little spaced out, I came closer to the two. The inside of the store felt like a cafe, with seats lined up here and there. In true amusement park fashion, the chairs were shaped like some kind of artwork, and seemed hard to use for normal people. *What were they trying to imitate?* I wondered. The design looked like some sort of alien, or a mollusk.

Utena and Kurashima sat across from each other at a table. I hesitated for a moment, trying to decide who to sit next to, before choosing Utena.

“Oh, you’re sitting here? Okay, come over!♪” Laughing sweetly, Utena shifted over to the side to give me space to sit. She was relatively bright and friendly—a good girl, although her childish way of speaking stood out.

“Did you sleep well?” she chatted. “Utena slept at a weird time, so she kept waking up and falling back asleep. I’m tired enough to want to go back to sleep, but somehow I’m wide awake instead.” The girl who was speaking about something looked understandably thin. Utena was a glamorous girl originally, but now, she looked worn out. It was probably because she’d cried her eyes out last night, but her eyes looked puffy and swollen. Her long hair was also getting frayed, and tangled in some places. She must have changed into a new uniform, though, because what she was wearing looked clean. Utena was the type to pay attention to her looks, so thinking that she wouldn’t want me to see her like this, I turned my eyes away from her.

■CHANNEL31■

“Excuse me.” Bowing to the lady, I sat. Kurashima was in front of me, and I hesitated on how to speak to him. *It’s been a while?— no, that’s not it. What were you doing all this time? I probably shouldn’t go all high handed and interrogate him like that.*

“Hitomi-chan, just eat for now,” he advised. “All we have is sweets, though.” Calmly, Kurashima slid the ceramic plate over my way.

Wrapped in the light coming from the window, Kurashima had an angelic beauty to him: he had feminine long hair with gentle good looks, and he was still in his all-black riding suit from yesterday. Compared to us, who’ve been through hell and look appropriately haggard for it, he’s somehow calm. He seems otherworldly.

He is an actor... Oh, that’s right, he was this kind of person. This is the face Kurashima always has. Somehow satisfied, I bow my head in greeting, saying, “Hello.”

It’s true that I’m starving. Saying my prayers, I put my hands together before reaching over to the plate and putting one of the marshmallow-like things into my mouth. It wasn’t as sweet as it looked; it was like mochi. Normally, I wouldn’t want to put something in my mouth if I didn’t know what it was. But I can’t fight against survival instinct— I need to put some nutrition in me so I can keep living.

“This place looked like a restaurant, so we were looking for stuff to eat,” he explained, “but we couldn’t really find anything, so basically, this was all we could manage. Please, eat up, have your fill.” Kurashima looked at me pleasantly, like I was a small animal. “You can’t fight on an empty stomach, after all.”

“I don’t plan to fight at all,” I retorted. “I don’t even know what I would be fighting, or how to fight in the first place. I’m so sick of all this... Kurashima-san,” I went on, “I haven’t seen you since forever. Where have you been, and what have you been doing all this time?” Deciding I should find this out if I could, I asked him.

Never dropping his smile, Kurashima acted as I expected, shrugging his shoulders like a true performer. “I was looking around here and there,” he said vaguely, “just like Kousuke-kun— Sorry we couldn’t act together, I heard that yesterday was quite harsh.”

“That’s right, we ran into some awful stuff. I’m so happy that you came back, Yuudai-kun.” Utena replied instead of me, before taking a handful of imitation

marshmallows and throwing them in her mouth like she was stress eating. Her chewing was audible. “I already hate this place...” she lamented. “I want to go back home. Let’s get out of here already, even one second earlier.” Putting her arm on the table so she could rest her cheek in her palms, Utena sighed listlessly.

It made me want to pat her head a little. It probably wouldn’t be proper to act that familiarly— so with a sigh of my own, I said, “Agreed. Umm, this...food? May I bring some over to Torii-san?” *She would also need to eat*, I thought. *She’ll need even more nutrition since she’s recovering.* “Actually,” I continued, “someone should still be keeping watch over the gift shop. What if there’s another fire? ... Kurashima-san?”

“Ah, sorry.” For some reason, he was looking out the window, all distracted and restless. Kurashima flashed a wry smile. “I think it’ll be fine, even if you aren’t that cautious, though. We can see the gift shop from here, too. If something happens, we’d be able to get there right away.”

Well, it looks like they haven’t forgotten about it, at least. Kurashima must have been hit somewhere strange as his mind doesn’t seem very calm— his behavior indicated his restlessness, even though yesterday he was pretty calm.

“This food, well... Go and give it to her. I wonder if Torii-chan can eat food yet, though?” he wondered. “It really wouldn’t be proper if I was to just walk up to sleeping girls, so I’ve been outside the whole time and don’t know much about her condition. Is she alright?”

“For now, she’s out of the woods,” I told him. “But she’s still seriously wounded, and it looks like she can’t move on her own. At the very least, though, I think she won’t suddenly die on us.”

“Hmm, is that so? Well that’s...great.” Kurashima didn’t look like he was really interested for some reason.

Kousuke *did* say that before he wandered into this dimension, he saw the two fighting while there was a fire raging, or something similar. But from Kurashima’s behavior, it felt more like they were complete strangers. It would be hard to delve deeper into this topic, though, so even if I wanted to ask I couldn’t. It would also be bad if this distracted us.

Still, this is somewhat of a disappointment, as Kurashima seems a little unreliable. *No, he did prepare food for us*, I reminded myself, *and he's trying his best*. It wouldn't do to rely on him for everything just because he's the oldest, or because he's a man. But I also shouldn't blame him for being gone for so long, or hope for too much out of him.

Thinking that, I changed the topic a little. "I heard that Kousuke went out to investigate things as soon as you came back. Did he leave you anything?"

"Eh...?" Kurashima sounded surprised. "No, he didn't say anything to me."

Hrm. I thought he'd leave the smartbug again as a means of communication; maybe he forgot, this time. Or maybe he hesitated to give an item(or bug?) as precious as the smartbug was to Kurashima, instead of handing it directly to me? There might be other reasons, too, but I can't think of any.

In my case, that was more convenient. I don't want to touch that creepy smartbug, if possible, but...I felt a little lonely, not having a way to contact Kousuke.

"I see, Kousuke, is it—?" Utena, who cheekily emptied the plate that was set in front of me, laughed like a cat. "Fufu... I see, Kousuke, that rascal, *is* just a little bit different when it comes to Hitomi. He's still just as blunt, but also kind, I guess is how you'd say it. I see, I see," Utena chortled happily. "Fufufufu♪" I'm not sure what she's talking about, but I get the feeling that it was pretty inconsequential.

So that's how it is; Kousuke's attitude towards me is a little different. Well, it's true that Kousuke's been putting on the mask of an obedient servant in front of Utena, so maybe it's just her he was different in front of. It looks like he was kind to Torii too, after all.

"Well, you could say that there's no point in trying to investigate this amusement park now, of all times," I said. "It looks like there are actually regular exits, so let's just leave through there." I had just placed the topic that we needed to discuss on the chopping board. "I have no idea where Kousuke is or what he's doing, but we should leave first. He said so, too. Kagamimori-san, are you okay with that?"

"Yeah," she agreed easily. "I want to say goodbye already, to this confusing

place.”

“Well, we haven’t actually made sure that if you leave through the exit, you actually *leave* yet, though,” I cautioned. “And the locations of the exits are a little vague in my mind, too.” I also don’t have the smartbug anymore, which would have had a map app on it, and had lost the map that Kousuke made when we escaped from the fire. I hadn’t had the wherewithal to pay attention to it in the middle of everything, so it was probably still underground in the control room. That map has probably burnt to ashes now.

Well, there *is* a giant creepy castle in the middle of the amusement park... As long as we head away from it, we should reach the edge of the park, I reasoned. And it looks like the entrances and exits to the park are all somewhere on the edge... Looking for an exit shouldn’t be that hard.

“It’ll be fine. In regards to that, leave it to me.” Kurashima raised his hand elegantly.

He did go out to investigate, maybe he found out where the exits are, I thought.

“Once we finish eating, let’s move,” I decided. “We’re going to get out of this amusement park.”

“Yeah! I’d be scared if I was alone, but I’ll be fine with Yuudai-kun and Hitomi with me!” Utena’s speech was bright, probably because we had a hope of leaving.

For some reason, she had a habit of pretending Torii didn’t exist, so I added something just in case: “Let’s carry Torii-san out too. It would be tough with just Kagamimori-san and I...can you help carry her, Kurashima-san?”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Rather than help, well, I’ll just take care of her myself.” It felt a little like empty bravado, but Kurashima thumped his own chest when he took on the job. He’s a guy, so I guessed that he would be able to carry Torii by himself on his back, or something.

At the same time, a jaunty tune started playing across the park; apparently, they’ve opened. It wouldn’t be good if we got caught up in mysterious events again, so we need to move fast. Quickly stuffing my face with marshmallows, I

stood up.

■CHANNEL32■

After that... Really, I wanted to escape this strange amusement park slash alternate dimension as soon as possible.

“Look, look, Hitomi! Isn’t this view a little interesting? This is an amusement park, right?” Utena chatted. “The view from up here is great— Not good, right? Creepy, right? It’s so disgusting, don’t you think, Hitomi?” She was all excited, somehow, and was making a lot of noise.

The giant Ferris wheel that you could see from anywhere in the park; Utena and I were currently riding in one of the gondolas. I felt that this wasn’t the time to be elegantly enjoying the view at all, though. Well, there were extenuating circumstances, and this had to be done.

The inside of the gondola was plain; normal, even, which was rare for this outrageous place. The seats in this gondola weren’t very comfortable. I was sitting on a seat made out of something smooth and hard, like a rock. Utena was in front of me, and we sat facing each other, all alone. Now that I thought about it, this is the first time I’ve been alone with her. Up until now, there’d always been someone else next to her, and we never had time to settle down and talk.

I gazed fixedly at Utena, who was glued to the window in front of me, looking outside. She had dull brown hair, and was wearing a skirt I was deeply familiar with, only rolled up to the limit to make hers as short as possible. With her knees on the seat, she was kicking her legs up and down behind her; any harder, and the force would show me her underwear. Feeling that this sight would be poison for my eyes, I looked away.

I wanted to leave. Why did I have to go on a trip to the sky with this princess? It made me want to run away. The movement of the gondola was painfully slow, and we were no longer at a height that I could jump from safely, so I had no choice but to sit tight.

“Hm? What, is there something on Utena’s face?” Feeling my gaze, Utena

turned around. “You seem weird. This’ll probably be the last time we see this place, so why don’t you enjoy the sights too, Hitomi?” She was in a really good mood, and has been like this for a while now. She’s probably just excited that we finally have a possible means to escape this amusement park dimension. She also seems like the sort of person who enjoys amusement parks in the first place.

“Don’t move around too much, okay?” I cautioned. Utena was moving a lot, and the gondola was shaking in proportion to her movements, which was really scary. “This place, it’s not a real— actually, it’s not like this place is a normal amusement park, anyway. It’s likely that nobody took safety into account,” I tried to explain to her. “So if you keep shaking the gondola, we might fall.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “If we fall from this high up it would hurt, and that would suck.” With a show of reluctance, Utena sat down in her seat properly.

Right next to us was the entrance/exit of the gondola, which was really just an oblong hole. If this was a real amusement park, there’d be someone to close the door and lock it, preventing people from falling out. But in this place, we shouldn’t expect anything of the sort. The entrance had been left open, and it was the picture of danger— outside of the gondola was empty air. If for some reason the gondola tilted, we could slip and fall out of it, only to be thrown into the atmosphere. If there had been a door or something, I would have closed it, but there wasn’t. Well, the lack of a door *was* the exact reason that we were able to hitch a ride without buying a ticket. But it’s not like I wanted to ride this thing, though.

“You’re looking a bit sour there, Hitomi.” Utena was unusually perceptive, which was unlike her. She was looking at my face. “Is there something you’re worried about? If you’re okay with Utena, I can at least listen.”

“No, it’s fine... I’m just...a little scared of heights,” I admitted. I came into this amusement park falling from way up high, after all. My memory of when I was saved was vague and hazy, but the fear of dying by falling is still ingrained into me. It’ll probably become full-blown acrophobia.

“Utena’s fine, you know? You’re pathetic, haha♪” Happy for some reason, Utena restlessly swung her legs from side to side. Apparently, she wasn’t

enjoying the uncomfortable gondola seats. She would sit on her hands, or stand up halfway and then sit down; Utena didn't stay still for a second. "God, what a terrible seat," she remarked.

"Yeah," I agreed, "we should have brought cushions with us."

And just like that, we made rather inconsequential small talk. I sighed. How long does it take for this gondola to go all the way around? At this rate, it would be half an hour, or perhaps even longer. And in that time, I would be stuck alone with this girl. The gondola wouldn't fit three people, so Kurashima stayed on the ground. It seems he's searching for a stretcher or something similar that he can use to carry Torii, while making sure she stays healthy. Certainly, carrying her on a stretcher or pushing her around on a cart would be easier than carrying her on his back. Kurashima's taking care of that, among other preparations for leaving. After finding out that yesterday, we'd experienced some pretty horrible things while he was away, he'd said he wanted to redeem himself for not being able to help.

Well, let him do what he wants, although I did want to help with the preparations for leaving. Before that, ride the Ferris wheel— that was also one of Kurashima's suggestions, as a way to kill time, or something.

Personally, I didn't want to sit in this unstable ride. Not only was it too tall, it also had nowhere to escape to. But for now, I also have my own reasons for choosing to do so; I wanted to try and find one of the exits, or the gates, while we were high up. I really don't want to be going the wrong way when the park shifts the gate locations, or possibly gets rid of them altogether— after all, I didn't have a clear memory of where they were located.

And more than that, there was something I wanted to make sure of, which was that the area past the gates really was the 'outside.' I couldn't get past the idea that, outside the gates, there would just be more of this alternate dimension, going on forever. If that was the case, escape would be impossible. Even if outside the gates was just an infinite wasteland, or just more alternate dimension... Just in case, I was still going to try and escape at least once. But if I can get a peek at it beforehand, I could at least keep down my despair if, by any

chance, we are actually unable to leave.

If I just went through the gates unknowingly, only to find out that I couldn't actually escape, my heart would just break, and I'd fall into despair.

It's also a way to kill time until we're ready to go. I was hoping that I might be able to come up with another way to escape just in case, while we had this vantage point. The first time I was falling when I was here, I didn't have any leeway to do that at all, but now I did. Looking at the scenery with the goal of escaping in mind, there might be some fact to discover that would lighten my heart.

I wasn't expecting much, though. I'm just an average high school student, not the protagonist of a story. I don't have the skills or brains to notice some important clue and use it in order to live longer, or something. That's why, well, this was just a consolation... It was action on the level of being better than not doing anything.

"It's boring just looking at the scenery, isn't it." Utena quickly got bored of the Ferris wheel, and she started winding up the tips of her hair with her fingers. I hadn't told her of my plans— to confirm the locations of the gates, among other things. It wasn't something important enough to ask for her help, and Utena doesn't seem like she'd like people telling her what to do.

"Let's talk, Hitomi," she said. "...hm? You don't want to?" I hadn't even replied yet, but Utena had already come to a hasty conclusion, and was wearing a frown on her face.

It was certainly true that I wasn't in the right frame of mind to enjoy conversation right now. I did think that it would be a little annoying to deal with Utena, but those feelings shouldn't have shown on my face. *I should just let the situation flow around me, I told myself, separating my body and my heart while putting on a forced smile. That's the kind of person I am.* I should have been good at acting tactfully.

"Hey, Hitomi, behind you... Isn't your window...looking awfully like a TV screen?" Utena said, asking something strange.

Panicking, I turned around, but there was just the window pane behind me. Beyond that, there was only the scenery of a creepy amusement park.

■CHANNEL33■

“That’s weird. Maybe it’s just you that can’t see it? Well, whatever. Not everyone looks at the world the same way. Utena, you know, is a little different from other kids.” Puffing out her chest with a huff, Utena started talking about herself.

She probably loves herself. Or rather, maybe she just doesn’t have that much interest in other people.

“It’s because Utena’s a Kagamimori, you know?” she went on. “Everyone’s just a little formal.” The Kagamimoris are the rulers of my town, and she’s their only daughter, a princess. Her surroundings always prize and pamper her. Saying yes to everything, willingly doing whatever she wanted. But that might be loneliness, too. It was a situation where interests and human relationships aligned, and the only people around are her slaves and servants. The throne is probably a lonely place, but that’s still a luxurious problem to have.

“That’s why, I was a little jealous of you, Hitomi.” Utena said something unexpected.



My surprised face was obvious enough that even I noticed I was making one, and I ended up staring straight at Utena. She looked down kind of awkwardly, while playing with her fingers. I had thought she was the type of girl to always go around boldly, with her head held high though.

“Kousuke talks about his childhood friend a lot, you know?” she asked rhetorically. “You’re the one, aren’t you? I heard she was the daughter of the Denkiyas... And there’s only one set of Denkiyas in town.” Utena was talking as she pleased, one-sidedly.

Is that so, Kousuke, you... So you’ve been talking about me. I realized. So the days we spent playing around as if we were one person are still inside him, if only a little. I wanted to ask what he thought of me, but I felt a little too embarrassed to actually put that into words— so, unable to reply, I just kept silent.

“You played together every day, didn’t you? And you’d come home covered in mud... Utena’s never done anything like that. It was all lessons for me. Even at home, I had to study and force smiles.” Breathing on the window behind her, Utena started drawing a picture in the fogged up glass. This is probably just idle chat to kill boredom; this gondola ride has been long and slow. “I didn’t know why I was living. The same days just repeated, over and over... But you know, I have a goal now. No, it’s more like a dream. Until now it’s just been a simple dream.” This was like when a small child was going to show you their ultimate treasure. Utena gave me a lovely upwards look, before whispering: “Utena, you see, wants to become an idol.” She acted shy while telling me that it was a secret.

She also mentioned a name. “Did you know? Utena’s mom was an idol named Hanemori Joururi... You probably don’t know, it’s a pretty old name. That’s why, Utena should also have some talent.” While talking, Utena took something out of her pocket and showed it to me. It looked like a postcard— On it was a beautiful and lovely girl dressed in an idol’s costume, and she looked like she was shining. It also had Hanemori Joururi’s signature on it, although it wasn’t handwritten, just printed on. With both her eyes shining passionately, Utena stared at the postcard for a while before putting it back into her pocket. Probably because it didn’t seem like you’d be able to bring anything with you

that you didn't already have on your person when you cross dimensions. That just meant that Utena always had the postcard on her person. It was just that important.

With enough passion that she could be called a fanatic, Utena spoke like she was in love. "Hanemori Joururi, Hanemori Joururi... She was a genius, a Super Idol. She's already retired though, so the only way I can watch her in action is in videos. In this rural place, gathering those videos and stuff was hard work. And that person is my mother," Utena told me happily.

I was working off of limited information, and I didn't know the name of that Idol in the first place, so my only reaction was, "Is that so?" But somehow, I remember hearing that name from somewhere. She was probably just that famous. Enough that you knew her name even if you weren't paying attention to the TV. At the level where even I know her name, at the very least.

"Utena wants to become like Hanemori Joururi, too. Just like mom... Once I realized that dream, every day was shining. Life needs to have goals. Don't you think, Hitomi?" I think that, too. Just existing every day isn't the same as living. But in that boring town, what kind of dream are you telling me to have? Utena said that she was jealous of me, but really, I'm jealous of her. Born into a high class family with more money that she could use in a lifetime...and she even has a dream for herself. She's a winner. It was almost hateful, how much she resembled a story's protagonist. In our world, Utena had a starring role; she was born that way.

"But you know, life just isn't that convenient. I decided I wanted to be an idol, but...Papa would probably say no," Utena said sadly. "I don't know what I need to do to become an idol, either. I asked Kousuke, and he's been looking things up for me, though."

"Hmmm, for that, wouldn't you have to go to the city?" I tried saying whatever popped into my mind. "Show business, the world inside the TV— it feels like a city thing."

"Recently, local idols have started becoming popular too, though," Utena remarked. "But in order to become like Hanemori Joururi, the city's the way to go, isn't it? Yeah, yeah. You understand, Hitomi." Utena nodded before looking

out the window at the scenery, seeming lost. She, who embraced her dreams, shouldn't have any time to waste in this nightmare of an amusement park. She probably wants to get back as fast as she can. "If it was for my dreams," she said, "I'd even throw away my family name." That statement shocked me.

So she wanted to become an idol so badly that she'd be willing to throw away the status and wealth that was the envy of so many people. Was it that wonderful, the world on the other side of the TV? I did feel like if she was gonna throw it away, she might as well give it to me, though.

"I'm serious." Utena said that clearly, even while shivering hopelessly. "I'm not just playing. This is Utena's life, I don't want to have even my dreams decided on by Papa."

"You're amazing, Utena-san. You already have a dream for your future." I said something that was way off the point of the conversation, even for me. Utena was blessed for even being able to have a dream; I had no such options.

No. If I thought enough about it to throw my family away, the future would be filled with endless possibilities. But I probably can't make such an important decision myself. I'll probably just go to school as usual and graduate, before inheriting the store. I'll become a true Denkiya. I had thought it wasn't that unhappy a thing, though.

"That's right. That's why Utena doesn't have time to waste being here. There's a mountain of things to do. I've got a one-way ticket to my dreams, after all. I managed to meet Yuudai-kun."

"Kurashima-san?" I asked. Why did he pop into the conversation here, of all places? I don't get the connection— If I remember correctly, he said he was an actor, though. Maybe she plans to get into contact with a TV station in the city through him, or something. "I'll be rooting for you. I really do think you have talent, after all." This wasn't just flattery, I meant what I said. "You're great at singing, after all."

"Huh?" she asked. "Did Utena ever sing in front of Hitomi?"

"No..." I explained. "Yesterday, I saw a video of you singing and dancing."

"I didn't sing at all yesterday," Utena said, sounding puzzled. "I did have a

dream about it, though. Maybe you saw one of the demo videos I had Kousuke take of me... Even though I told him to tell no one that Utena wanted to become an idol.” Hrm... So that video I saw yesterday in the control room was Utena’s dream, was it? Now that I think about it, Utena was sound asleep when we saw her. Why were those monitors in the control room showing her dream? I’m not surprised at anything that goes on in this mystery park anymore, though... I got the feeling that this conjecture had a huge hint in it that would help in figuring out the nature of this alternate dimension.

I peeked at someone else’s dream. No. Thinking normally, it was more likely that Kousuke threw up the demo video on the screen by accident. Like he would be walking around carrying a PC or a terminal like that, and played it by accident. But I’m not so sure; it didn’t feel like that was the case. Kousuke reacted like that was the first time he saw that video, after all.

■CHANNEL34■

“Hehe,” she giggled. “But I’m happy you said that I had talent, and was good at singing.” Utena smiled and bowed, which was unlike her. “Thanks, Hitomi. You’re kind. Utena was losing her confidence, so I’m happy. Utena’s looks are plain, after all... It’s not the face of an idol, right?”

She’s right, Utena’s face was pretty average. But I don’t think all idols have to be beautiful. This is especially true recently— on TV, the idols I remember are all girls that have that close kind of feel, like the kind I would pass by in town. I’m not an expert, though, so I might be wrong.

“I’ve started hearing some awful rumors, too,” she sad sadly, “bad enough to crumble Utena’s identity. When I confessed to Kousuke and told him I liked him, I was completely rejected, too.”

“.....what?” I couldn’t let that go, so I latched onto Utena’s words. “You uhh, confessed to Kousuke?” The princess of the Kagamimoris? To a normal guy, now that I think about it?

“Yeah. It looks like Utena falls in love easily. Kousuke, you know, has his parents’ situation and stuff, so it was probably inevitable. But he’s been by Utena’s side, and is nice. He’s kind and reliable, too. He’s pretty good-looking,

too, don't you think?"

Is that so... Well, I do think he's above average. My chest is all aflutter, and I can't think straight. Panicking, I kind of took it out on Kousuke by insulting him. "Actually, Kousuke, that guy... Who does he think he is, to reject the daughter of the Kagamimoris? There's no way. Sorry, he's still a child at heart."

"Ufufu. You talk like you know, Hitomi." Utena gave a bitter smile, looking somewhat lonely. "How do you say it, maybe the order was wrong. Utena's an honest person so when I feel like I like someone I tell them. Kousuke, he panicked a lot when he rejected me. Like 'sorry, I can't,' and stuff. He clearly denied what Utena said, that was probably the first and last time." With affection, Utena talked about a side of Kousuke I didn't know. "That's why I got obsessed over him— Utena doesn't get said no to a lot. I end up getting everything I want. Utena started caring about him the day he wouldn't become mine even though Utena said she liked him." So at first she confessed because she wanted to, but when she got rejected, it conversely lit a fire in her. What a troublesome, or rather, complicated, maiden's heart this lady has.

I kind of get where she's coming from though. You want something *because* you can't have it. That might just be natural human mentality.

"That's why Kousuke was Utena's favorite from then on, and we were together even more. Utena even told him all her most important secrets. Like Utena's dream of becoming an idol... He's my best friend, although it may just be Utena who thinks that."

"Why did Kousuke reject Kagamimori-san's confession, I wonder?" It was a real question, I was curious. Utena's cute, in a normal way. It's not like it would be impossible for him physically, I think. But if that was the reason he rejected her, I was ready to abuse and slander him verbally, as a woman myself.

"It wasn't anything unusual. He had someone else he liked." Utena looked at me straight on, with a smile that was, somehow, very mature. "Probably, that person would be you, Hitomi. Kousuke likes Hitomi. You guys are precious childhood friends, aren't you? He's loved you for a long time, now. It's like a girl's manga, Utena was convinced when she thought of it like that."

"No— no way, there's no possibility of that." For some reason, I denied that

desperately. My heart was ringing like an alarm. “There’s no way... We were really small children when we got along. Until the both of us got trapped in this alternate dimension, we hadn’t even talked for years.”

“Stuff like love and dreams, they don’t just go away with time, right? That’s what Utena wants to believe. Well, all of it is Utena’s own deduction.” It probably wasn’t a fun subject for Utena, from how quickly she cut it off. Well, even if she did it lightheartedly at first, he was someone she confessed her love to... She probably didn’t want to have to say, ‘He likes you,’ to someone he might like.

No, but it’s not like... I don’t think the one Kousuke likes is me, though. I mean, he didn’t act like that at all; we’re just childhood friends. I’m absolutely shaken. I completely forgot the fact that I was in a bizarre alternate dimension, my thoughts whirling around in circles.

“Once we get out of here safely, let’s interrogate Kousuke about it,” Utena said. “They say first loves never work out, but it’s the love life of someone Utena confessed her love to, even if it was just once. Utena will cheer you on. Kousuke, and Hitomi, too, while Utena’s at it. No, no, it’s the love between both of you.” Playfully, Utena gave me a charming wink. “Hitomi, too— if possible, Utena would be happy if you cheered her on, too.” Utena was still saying something, but I couldn’t react.

“Don’t you get the feeling that we could be friends?” Flashing an incredibly charming smile, Utena suddenly stood up, and then she started talking while looking somewhere far away. “Now then, this was fun, but let’s end the talking here.”

Startled, I looked up at her. The gondola was shaking heavily, and I couldn’t remain calm. I started scratching at the surface of the seat, with nowhere to grab onto. Shelving my thoughts momentarily, I looked up at Utena. “W-what’s wrong?” I asked.

“This height should be enough.” Utena looked around at her surroundings in a circle: at the window panes, which made up a large part of the gondola, in order to let people enjoy the scenery. She glared hatefully at the bizarre scenery on the other side. While we were busy talking, the gondola had reached the top of

the Ferris wheel. It was tall enough to give me vertigo; I could see the whole park from here. The park must have opened, because I could see the customers with unrecognizable faces wriggling around below, like a swarm of bugs. “I’m so sick of it... I can’t endure it anymore, this amusement park,” Utena spat, as if it was natural; suddenly, and in the blink of an eye.

“I’ll be going back first, Hitomi. Come right after, so we can talk again?” Saying those last words, Utena quickly stepped out of the entrance of the gondola. And, just like that, fell without any resistance.

“Utena-sa—” I had no idea what was going on, and could only sit there, dumbfounded. Huh, she fell? Why? An accident? But it looked like she fell out of the gondola of her own accord— what’s this? What’s going on? Panicking, I stuck my face as close to the window as I could. I looked down at the ground. Utena fell as she picked up speed. It must have been scary; she was holding her head with eyes closed. She hit the ground with a lot of momentum. It was too far away, so I heard almost no sound, but it was probable that she died instantly.

■CHANNEL35■

I spent the time until the gondola reached the ground slowly running out of patience. Ever since I’ve been thrown into this amusement park slash alternate dimension, it’s just been a series of bizarre things and scary events. This time spent in the gondola, which was probably only tens of minutes, has been the most nightmarish so far.

I bit down the urge to vomit. Or rather, it feels like I’ve been vomiting this entire time. I even wanted to jump after her, to chase and reach Utena even one second faster. At the same time, I wished that she would never reach the ground. Unable to calm down, I vomited several times, but I still couldn’t bring myself to check the ground through the window again.

If only this was all just a nightmare, all of it. So I wished, but it wasn’t granted. The gondola lowered itself steadily. Eventually, it reached a point where I could jump off safely, so I stood up, trembling. I couldn’t put power into my hips, so I couldn’t walk properly, and I ended up bumping my shoulders and knees into

the gondola several times. I didn't even feel pain; I was dulled to everything.

Somehow, I managed to tumble off of the gondola by moving in a crawl. If I stayed still, I'd be stuck in the gondola for a while again, and nothing would change. There's no point in putting it off; I can't just let time flow past me.

Something's off, why did this happen? "Kagamimori-san," I croaked, and got a few steps away from the gondola. I had fallen down, completely powerless, and couldn't move even an inch. There was a meager fence around the Ferris wheel, to keep people from getting too close. Leaning on that, I somehow managed to get myself upright.

Completely unminding of me, the Ferris wheel's gondola passed nearby, too close for comfort, along with a dull, heavy sound. Noticing the noise without listening to it, I gathered my courage and looked forward.

There, lay the squashed form of Utena. She had fallen from a considerable height; of course there was no way she had lived. It looked like she'd fallen on her head— from her head, to her neck, to around her shoulders, all of it had been pulped and smattered. The mess that had been her blood and meat and bones was mixed together, and spread about unnaturally. Her lower half had only slightly retained shape; I could just make out a bent and broken leg, as well as her bloodstained uniform. She resembled a bug that had hit the windshield of a moving car. Her humanity— the dreams and emotions she held in her chest — all of it had been lost.

At the very least, I couldn't understand the situation. Once night falls, her remains would surely be cleaned up by the workers of this amusement park: those giant arms. I wouldn't be able to even come close. Should I gather up her remains, and dig a hole somewhere to bury her? I didn't even have the guts to hold a service for her.

Averting my eyes, I hung my head. "Why—" I repeated those words over and over. Why? Why? Why? Was there a reason for Utena to jump and commit suicide? Even though just a few seconds before she walked out, we were getting along pretty well and enjoying a chat? It was almost like she had been controlled by an evil magician. It didn't feel real— She had been the princess of our town, a protagonist of a girl who could get anything she wanted. She loved

and had dreams, she had been an enviable girl who sung the praises of life. Why did she have to die? “Kagamimori-san,” I called out her name again, but of course there was no reply.

Instead, there was someone who approached me, and called out, “Is...that, Utena-chan? Uumm, Hitomi-chan?” I sat there in blank amazement. It was Kurashima. While we were riding the Ferris wheel, he should have been preparing to leave, though. It appears that he heard the sounds, and came over from the gift shop where Torii was sleeping. He was acting awfully carefree for that, though.

Kurashima’s always, always late. He’s a dunce, and never here when it counts. He must not have seen her final moments, because he didn’t seem to recognize that the corpse splattered all over the ground was Utena. Unmoved, he was just bewildered.

He walked over to me, crouched, and worriedly put a hand on my shoulder, shaking me while asking questions. “What happened? Can you explain?” I raised my head, but like a toddler, I couldn’t speak well. I almost wanted to latch onto Kurashima and cry my eyes out. I wanted to assert my powerlessness, and have someone save me. But before that, Kurashima said something that I couldn’t ignore. “This might be Kousuke’s doing, too.”

Kousuke? I don’t know why that name popped out here. Reflexively, I gave Kurashima a serious look. His doing? What was? The cause of this awful scene was Kousuke, you say? I don’t know what kind of theory he has. Kurashima must have thought I was in shock and I couldn’t speak, or something, when I sat there absent-mindedly. Without waiting for a reply, he kept speaking, saying things that I didn’t understand at all. “I had my doubts from the beginning.” Kurashima patted my head, trying to calm me down. For some reason, it felt filthy. I couldn’t breathe properly, because the smell of blood wafting off of Utena’s remains was so awful.

“Right before we found ourselves in this alternate dimension, I saw it,” Kurashima explained. “I thought it might have been a misunderstanding, though. But I saw him trying to burn Utena-chan and Torii-chan, both of whom were unconscious.”

I have no idea what he means...at all, anymore. Kousuke was? To Utena, and Torii?

“I— did I say this before...? I am just a traveler,” Kurashima went on, “who got lost and found your town. I was traveling on my motorcycle, going from place to place. It was coincidence that I came to your town.” Before I realized it, I had started crying, and Kurashima wiped those tears away. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to comfort me or tease me— it was a creepy, disgusting feeling.

“There, I met Utena-chan, you see. Apparently she took a shine to me, and wouldn’t leave me alone, though... For me, I wanted to ask her where the exit to the town was, and if there was anywhere else interesting to visit. I had planned to set that as my destination and leave immediately.” Even though I was averting my eyes, Kurashima gazed at Utena’s corpse the whole time. Our eyes didn’t meet. Not one iota of his emotions came through to me. “Utena wouldn’t tell me anything about that. But I wanted to find out, no matter what... When we split, I ran away on my motorcycle, but there was something I forgot to ask her. What was it, I wonder; was it about where I could find a gas station?” Kurashima suddenly started grumbling fast with words like ‘I forgot,’ as if the conversation was suddenly more trouble than it was worth. “In the end, I went back to the shrine I’d left Utena at... There, I found Kousuke setting fires all around Utena-chan and Torii-chan, who were unconscious. As one would expect, I couldn’t let that pass. I hurried to get there. It was a shrine, so I couldn’t ride up the steps, and I had to run.”

I don’t care about that.

“I’m not sure if my luck was bad, or my timing was bad... It’s always the same with me,” Kurashima lamented. “Just when I was asking Kousuke what he was doing, we got caught by the fire. Breathing in the smoke, my consciousness went faint, and when I came to, I was here in this amusement park.” He looked around, like this whole thing was a bother. “Good grief, what a disaster to get involved in. Well, anyway, my guess is...that Kousuke tried to kill Utena-chan and Torii-chan for some reason. Maybe there was a fight, or difficulties with love. I’m not from here, I wouldn’t know.”

Kousuke did? He tried to kill Utena and Torii? I wanted to laugh it off and say ‘That’s stupid,’ but I couldn’t. I’ve been estranged from Kousuke for a long time,

now. We go to the same school, but we've never even talked. I didn't even look at him from far away, I just pretended that we didn't know each other and kept my distance. I wouldn't know about the circumstances of those three, of what kind of relationship they'd built.

But. What Kurashima talked about, and what Kousuke said in that control room— they both have their similarities, but they don't mesh. One of them is lying. They're trying to gloss over something inconvenient. They're trying to convince me forcibly of something.

■CHANNEL36■

"Even in this amusement park, there are traces of Kousuke trying to go after us." Without minding that I haven't given any indication that I was still listening, Kurashima talked on. "The parliament building imitation and the merry-go-round were both set on fire, and weren't you guys attacked by monsters? Those things, the living things that look like they've been combined with a screen, they listen to us, to an extent. Like an obedient pet."

True, as I recall Kousuke was using that smartbug— the thing that looked like a screen combined with a bug— very easily. That part makes sense, I think. If that was the case, I wish he'd told me that sooner. If those monsters had listened to us, we might have been able to deal with them. It's too late now, though.

Now that he mentioned it, I get the feeling that that giant monkey monster stopped assaulting Torii as soon as Utena yelled for it to. If only she'd done that earlier. At the very least, Torii would have been ok.

"He tried to kill you by provoking those monsters," Kurashima explained. "In reality, Torii-chan was gravely wounded... It's a miracle she's still alive, as she was clearly attacked with intent to kill." By Kousuke-kun, or so Kurashima kept repeating at me, filling that phrase with spite.

He was pointing Kousuke out as the culprit. "He's just suspicious in general, he is. He keeps going off on his own; he calls it investigation but, really, I bet he's just trying to find a chance to end us. And he's attacked us several times already. The two of us have survived narrowly, but Torii-chan is greatly injured,

and now Utena-chan is dead.”

That’s right, Utena is dead. As I thought, if you die in this dimension, you die for real. There is no salvation.

“This is just my conjecture...” Kurashima said. “But Utena-chan was tricked by Kousuke-kun. It looked like the two of them were very close friends. Whatever he says, well, she would believe it over something I said.”

Friends. It shouldn’t have been a relationship that could be summed up so easily. He doesn’t know anything.

“Utena was probably tricked by Kousuke, who was giving her false information,” Kurashima concluded.

At that point, I couldn’t stand to listen to any more. I plugged my ears.

“—told her a way to escape,” he continued. “A way to escape from this bizarre amusement park, that is... It probably went like this: ‘If you die, you’ll get out.’” That’s why she jumped to her death, or so Kurashima said.

I stood up. I looked at Kurashima vacantly. At his refreshing, attractive looks. Feminine long hair— balanced physique that I could only discern because of the riding suit that complimented his body line— An actor that came from the city, from beyond the TV.

I glared at the outsider. “Kousuke is my childhood friend.” I clearly put into words what I probably hadn’t told Kurashima yet. “That’s why, when it comes to him...I know him better than you. He’s not the awful type of person that would drive a girl who confessed to him further down into hell. He’s the type of idiot who would drag her along, care for her, and at least try to protect her.” I reached my hand out to grab Kurashima’s rider suit while he was dumbfounded. I pulled down at the zipper that ran down his body’s center line with all my strength. It wasn’t like I had any proof. I just thought, if there was any place on him to hide something disgusting, it would be there— he was reeking of blood the whole time, too.

“You’re a liar, and a killer.” I said, done using polite speech. His clothes, which had been hidden by the riding suit, were soaked with blood. The huge amount of blood, which was dried and sticky, was blackened and strange. It would’ve

been fine if he had just changed, but I guess he hated the idea of putting on an unknown school uniform.

Troubled, the outsider— Kurashima, let out a bitter laugh. “You’re a stupid girl, aren’t you? More than I thought. Although you looked more clever than the other girls...”

“You don’t know me.” I pushed him away. I tried to step back a little, but I couldn’t. There was a creepy, soft sensation on the back of my head. Like I touched a marshmallow.

Timidly, I looked up. There, was the giant slug or sea slug-like thing I saw last night. There were specks all over its body, and they opened and closed bizarrely to expose its interior screens. *When did it get close*, I wondered. It didn’t make any sound at all, so I didn’t notice.

No. Kurashima was distracting me until it could get close. While he spoke of appropriate, but meaningless things, enough that even I felt something was wrong.

The slug dripped mucus down onto the nape of my neck, dirtying it. I found the answer to another irrelevant question: the cooking that I ate earlier with Utena and Kurashima was...probably this thing’s meat, because the texture was the exact same. When I looked, I could see traces where parts of it had been cut off around the tail end of the slug. Now that I think about it, Kurashima didn’t touch the cooking at all. I did wonder where he got the materials for the food.

The monster restricted my movements by doing its body’s equivalent of leaning over on top of me. I was basically buried under this giant slug. My back hurt like it was being toasted. Is it trying to kill me, bit by bit, with its digestive fluids? It’s a slow thing, I should be able to get away if I run, but it’s all over if I trip and fall. Kurashima probably doesn’t intend to let me get away, either. I can’t win in a chase over an older man.

This was the situation to run desperately, but before that there was something that I was curious about. “Why?” In a daze, I asked while gazing at the monster that was coming closer to me. “Why are you doing all these terrible things to us?”

“I don’t really have any feelings towards you, that’s why I was trying to

convince you. I was thinking that it would be fine if I let only you live,” Kurashima said, pulling up the zipper on his suit in an easygoing fashion. “Although, it was more like it didn’t matter to me if you lived or died.” He was knocked onto his butt when I pushed him away, but he slowly stood back up. At some point, he had pulled out a large knife. There was some blood stuck on it. He didn’t talk about his thoughts like a villain from some cheap detective novel. He just bared his intent to kill me without any explanation.

It’s to be expected; I’m neither a policewoman nor am I a famous detective. In terms of roles, I’d be a minor or supporting role with nothing to do with the main plot— a victim, at best. I wouldn’t be able to get him to kindly reveal his circumstances. He just wants to quickly take care of me before moving on to the next step.

■CHANNEL37■

“You’re such a stupid girl, Hitomi-chan. It would’ve been fine if you’d just honestly believed me, like Utena did. But I’m surprised. Haha, to think that she actually jumped off.” Kurashima gave a sidelong glance toward the remains of Utena, which remained scattered off to the side. “As expected, that hurt my heart a little, because I’m not really a murderer. It’s stressful, you know, to trick and kill girls. That girl, she said she wanted to become an idol. She was really happy when I said I’d introduce her to a major production company.” Kurashima put the knife to my neck. He probably doesn’t want to dirty his own hands— he’d avoid it if he could. I understand, I hate it, too. I guess he plans to leave my murder to the giant slug; he’s just making sure I don’t manage to run away.

Wiping away the mucus and my own tears, I stared at Kurashima. I understood. Ah, so it was like that. Utena was serious. She was trying to pursue her dream earnestly, with all her might. When someone offered mediation to help grant her dreams, she pushed forward unhesitatingly. Torii, Kousuke, and even Utena herself, had said that she fell in love easily. So Utena had fallen in love at first sight with Kurashima, who has good looks... She wasn’t a stupid girl in love, who would believe anything her partner said. Because she had a dream she chased after dearly.

She believed in Kurashima's halfhearted explanation. To try and escape by dying; it must have been so scary for her. Eyes closed and trembling, she jumped to her death, because she wanted to be an idol like who she said her mother was, Hanemori Joururi. For that, she was prepared to throw away everything and push forward. Her dream ended here, in the hands of unreasonable malice.

Of course, I don't have the qualifications to blame Kurashima one-sidedly. I just decided that our town's princess was unapproachable... Right up until the end, I was stupidly formal, using that excuse to keep my distance from her. Basically, we never even talked.

If only I'd faced her properly. If only I'd opened up my heart, and talked without hiding anything. She should have been able to realize that she was being tricked by Kurashima. We should've been able to change this tragedy, this ending with no salvation in sight. To think that you could escape by dying. Such an idiotic evil should have been wiped away.

But it's too late to regret now. Utena had jumped, and died in a pulpy mess. I'm alive— but what can I even do? How do I turn this situation around? No. Even if, right this instant, a miracle happened, and both Kurashima and the giant slug were thrown off of me... Even if I survived, what would come of it? I have nothing, nothing... I'm different from Utena, I just live every day passively. My life was a boring one. I was just rotting away slowly. She had dreams, fell in love, cried, laughed, and got mad— just like a storybook protagonist. Compared to Utena, who faced her life with all her might and then died, what does it matter if I survive?

My heart felt like it was going to break. I was going to stop caring about everything. Lying face down, I felt powerless— and then I realized that something in my pocket was shivering. Caressing it, it felt a little like something I recognized. Suffering, and feeling the pressure of the giant slug that was glued to my back, I cowered. And so Kurashima wouldn't be able to notice, I checked on the shivering thing.

"What's wrong? Sorry, just think of it as your bad luck, and give up." Seeing me all curled up, Kurashima made a troubled face. "You really are completely unrelated, aren't you?"

“Kurashima-san.” I immediately turned back, pretending that nothing had happened— and I looked at Kurashima. “What you talked about earlier, it wasn’t about Kousuke... I think it was about you, Kurashima-san. But there’s something I don’t quite understand.” Acting inappropriately calm, even for me, I asked, even though I wasn’t really interested. “Why are you trying to kill Kagamimori-san— no, all of us? What’s your motivation? What kind of relation do you have to us?”

“You might not know,” he said, “but a long time ago, there was a person named Hanemori Joururi.”

There’s that name again. Who the heck is she? She’s an idol and Utena’s mother, or at least, Utena said that she was. If I had known that I was going to be involved with that name this much, I would have paid more attention to the TV. Even though I did remember seeing her name on TV, somewhere. But, thinking that it had nothing to do with my life, I let it go. I’m regretting that now.

“Someone had their life messed up by her. This is revenge for that, I hope. That’s why, truly, you have nothing to do with this, but...I can’t let you live so that you can testify to what I did here. Incidentally, I’ll be ending you now— sorry?” As I thought, Kurashima was looking at me remorsefully. It seems he had no other option— really, why am I about to be killed by this guy? Of course, the situation started moving before I was able to understand it.

“If you’re gonna say, ‘Sorry,’ then don’t do it in the first place.” At the same time I heard that sudden voice, there was also the sound of a light blow being landed. Before I realized it, Kousuke had snuck up behind Kurashima, and hit him with a small portable TV. Who knows where he managed to find that, though. Kurashima fell to the side without a word, and my childhood friend hit him, over and over again, while he was helpless.

You’re late, I thought, though he did look just a bit like a Tokusatsu hero, though.

■CHANNEL38■

Just like when we were little, I walked while carrying Kousuke on my back.

In the past, when Kousuke was too exhausted to move after we'd been playing around in the fields...I'd carry him, just like this, because I was taller than he was, back then.

But now, he's already passed me in both height and weight. Our physiques are different, so I can't carry him on my back properly. Kousuke's feet are left dragging and scraping on the floor. It seems he can't walk on his own anymore.

Kousuke was soaked in blood. After he summoned the last of his strength and beat Kurashima, who was trying to kill me, black and blue, he fell over. He didn't move after that. I don't know if he's dead or alive right now.

Carrying Kousuke, I headed for the park's exit: the gates. Every step is hard. My uselessly grown childhood friend. My movements are sluggish, and my thoughts paralyzed. If I lost focus, I don't even think I'd be able to remember what I was trying to do.

That's right. We need to escape from this bizarre amusement park— this dimension. I should have already set that as my goal. I walk. My breath hitches in my throat and I stop, before willing myself to walk again. Step by step, I move forward.

"Kousuke," I called out to him, but there was no response. Turning all the breath in my lungs to energy, I said nothing more and moved forward. For the time being, I figured out where the gates were when I was riding the Ferris wheel. I should be going in the right direction.

My surroundings were crowded and unrelated to me: the horde of faces I can't recognize; jaunty music; the many attractions, incessantly moving. A fun, but distant atmosphere— I can't afford to care. It has nothing to do with me. Right now, I just want to return to my own life, which was boring and flat.

It might be because the monotonous work of walking had left my brain bored, but my thoughts were restored a little, and I started thinking of things unchecked. From the information I had gathered without actually trying to do so, I made conjectures: Kurashima was trying to kill us. He said it was revenge for someone who got their life messed up by Hanemori Joururi... His murderous intent was probably pointed towards that girl, Utena. A lot of things had already been taken care of before I got to ask for details, so I'm not too sure. He

probably tried to kill Utena with a knife at an unpopular shrine; the blood soaked into his clothes under the riding suit was probably splatter from that.

As for Torii, I'm not sure of the details, but she must have stumbled onto the scene of the crime or something similar, and then got caught up in it. According to Kousuke, he saw Torii and Kurashima arguing, after all. Either she was trying to protect Utena from being killed, or she saw Utena wounded and, enraged, bit into Kurashima. It became an argument, and then a fight— but in terms of pure power, Torii would never be able to win against Kurashima. The tables were turned, and Torii fell under assault from Kurashima. I'm not sure if she was killed, wounded, or knocked unconscious, though.

And I'm not sure if Kurashima set the fires to take care of the bodies, or if something completely unrelated happened and the fire was natural, but the fact remains that there was a fire. Kousuke came along after that, and he stepped inside to try and save Torii and Utena, and possibly even Kurashima, because he's a softie who wants to be a hero. He probably couldn't just leave people caught in a fire to die, either.

And in the end he, too, was killed by the fire. What an idiot, Kousuke. Well, right next to the shrine that was on fire was...me, who dozed off while manning the store. Apparently I failed to escape, and as a result, was caught in the fire, too— I look like the bigger idiot, though.

In that way, all of us who were in that fire found ourselves here in this dimension, for some reason. Thinking simply, isn't this alternate dimension probably some world after death, just like I had hypothesized at one point? As for what this place is, and why we found ourselves in this bizarre space... Of course, it's outside of my ability to imagine.

Kurashima's objective was probably the death of Utena. He looked for a chance, and then came after us. He gathered us all in the parliament-like building, and probably set fire to it to try to burn us all to death at once. And later he provoked the monsters, trying to get them to eat us. At the end, he tricked Utena into committing suicide. He even went after me. It's not like I can confirm it, though. I didn't have that kind of margin... But he had probably already killed Torii, who wasn't able to ride the Ferris wheel with us. There were any number of ways to do it if he wanted to, after all.

And the biggest eyesore to Kurashima was probably Kousuke, who, for some reason, insisted on acting alone. I don't know what he was thinking when he moved away from everybody else— this is all unknown to me. Maybe he simply wanted to have some adventure time without being bothered by girls? In order to finish him off, Kurashima set another fire over the underground control room he was in. I guess I was just an extra. But we managed to survive it safely.

However, Kurashima didn't give up there. He probably tried to kill Kousuke again sometime over the course of the night. After Kousuke applied first aid to Torii, he was standing guard. Kurashima lured him out, somehow, and stabbed him with the knife. Kousuke's a regular high schooler, too. If he gets ambushed, he probably wouldn't be able to resist. Like that, he believed that Kousuke was dead— and in the morning, Kurashima had rejoined us. Although he'd said Kousuke told him to stand guard after they'd swapped places, Kurashima was just saying that; it wasn't like Kousuke actually told him to do so. Both Torii and I had swallowed that lie whole.

Just like that, Kurashima probably planned to kill us all, but Kousuke had clung to life stubbornly. Stabbed, with damaged innards, leaking so much blood... In reality, he was very nearly dead. It was likely that Kurashima wasn't a professional killer, or anything. He probably just left Kousuke somewhere, thinking him dead already. Kousuke applied emergency treatment to himself, and managed to preserve his life.

And just a while ago, while I was being attacked by Kurashima and the giant slug, I let the smartbug fly. He'd secretly slipped the smartbug into my pocket. On the screen, he wrote instructions to be careful of Kurashima.

Like he's so great. I just talked at random to distract Kurashima, and I managed to trick him so he wouldn't notice Kousuke— who was near death with his grave wounds— and could only move sluggishly as he approached.

It went well. Kousuke squeezed out the last of his power, and hit Kurashima with the TV. He saved me, but that was his limit. He'd lost too much blood. I knew that Kousuke was probably already dead. I can feel him growing colder on my back; both his heartbeats and breathing have already stopped. This is just meat that used to be my childhood friend. But, I couldn't just throw it away.

Kurashima's probably not dead. He was beaten up badly, but he might still recover; I can't afford to take it easy, here. I should have finished him off. Putting that off was Kurashima's last mistake, too. But, I feel like Kousuke would be sad if I killed a person.

That's wrong. That's just an excuse. I'm just stroking the surface, letting it pass; I don't have the guts to stick my hand into the deep end. I just didn't want to shoulder a sin as heavy as murder. Putting on a face as if it had nothing to do with me— I simply didn't want to do what I didn't want to do. I'm running again, trying to draw distance. I'm trying to escape this dimension, and make it all like it never happened.

But what else should I do? Someone like me is the only one left alive. What should I do, I wonder... Right now, I just want to hurry up and go back while still dragging Kousuke along, if possible. I don't think we'd be in time for medical aid; he got stabbed in the guts, after all. It's a fatal wound, but I want him to have a funeral, at least. If that's the case, I'd want to bring along Utena and Torii, too, but carrying Kousuke alone is already this hard.

"Hey, Kousuke." Without expecting a reply, I asked the corpse of my childhood friend. "The person you liked; who was it? You rejected Kagamimori-san's confession, didn't you? You said it was because you had someone else you liked—" I drew closer to the gates, and the noise of the crowd went far away. It's just an entrance and an exit; there's no attractions near here, and the faceless crowd is basically mute. It was awfully quiet, and the sounds of my heavy breathing echoed loudly. "It would've been nice if it was me. I liked you, just a bit, for a long time, now. But it's probably not, right? I bet it's someone I don't know. I'll go back and tell that person properly for you. She'll probably just be confused, though." My monologue echoed hollowly in this very strange alternate dimension.

"There was a stupid boy who admired heroes... He was my childhood friend, though. I wanted to tell him: 'Your dream came true at the end, you were just a little bit cool, there.'" There are no tears, anymore. Just endlessly putting my feet forward, I headed outside, without looking back.

■CHANNEL39■

My worst fears came true. Carrying Kousuke on my back, I went to this bizarre amusement park's admission gates— the place where we believed we could escape from— and left the park. After walking for a few minutes, though, I collapse right then and there. On the floor, I hung my head in defeat, feeling Kousuke's unusually heavy weight on my back.

The amusement park's surroundings were just empty wasteland. Cracked and dried earth, spreading out endlessly; I could see nothing, stretching all the way out to the horizon. Actually, it's almost refreshing, and I was put into a happy mood. "Ahaha," I laughed like my head's gone a little strange. Of course, I wasn't that hopeful of such a simple, game-like salvation as just heading through the admission gates to escape. From the gondola of the Ferris wheel, I saw distantly, from a high vantage point, the scenery outside of the amusement park. I didn't want to believe it; that, even if we left the amusement park, it was just more of this other dimension. That there was no leaving, no salvation... But right in front of me, and all around, the truth was made clear— I had no choice but to admit that I was out of options.

My heart broke, and I sank into despair. Even though I was thinking of what to do after, after I escaped... First, I'd want to take a bath and change clothes. How would I explain things to Kousuke's, Utena's, and Torii's families, I wonder? How troublesome. Would mom and dad have already come back from the city?

It seems I was involved in a fire. What should I do if the house is burned down? Where would I live, what would I do about tonight's dinner— what was the schedule for school tomorrow? I was thinking of those things at length, but all of it was blown away in an instant. I can't think of anything, anymore. I can't move, either. After laughing, I started to cry .

"Kousuke," I sobbed. I draw myself closer to Kousuke, who I still had on my back. He's completely a corpse now. His ashen skin was as inhuman as the CRT TV screens I was pushed up against when I first came to this alternate dimension. I stroked his hair with my fingers— If I do that, Kousuke can't defy me— that's why.

"Kousuke— Kousuke, Kousuke..." Wake up. Come back to life. Talk to me,

don't leave me alone... Save me, please. I hate this. I hate this. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to go back; I want to go back home. I want to see mom and dad. I'm tired already. I'm sick of this, it's too much. I can't stand living here for even one more second.

“WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON?!” Suddenly, I heard a singing voice. Unrelated to me, it was an awfully one-sided and unreasonable singing voice. Just listening to it makes me feel worse. I feel like it's ridiculing me; am I that funny? I've lost any place I had to go. I'm talking to the corpse of my childhood friend. Could someone find these things funny and laughably stupid? I hope they die. It's making me awfully angry and irritated. *Ahh, Utena might just have chosen the right way to get out of here*, I thought. I should've died. If I died, it would have been over; everything would have been over. But, I'm still alive. That's why, reflexively, I looked over at the voice.

“CAN SOMEONE TELL ME PLEASE—” There, were a lot of TVs, fallen over like they were rolled out. Outdated CRT TVs, as well as thin flat-screens and portable types... All types of TVs were lying about everywhere. Most of them had dark screens, but there were also some showing static, and others playing random shows of all different kinds. Like a garbage dump, several of those TVs were piled together to form a small mountain.

I start to make conjectures, although I can't really see any point in thinking anymore. From yesterday's events, I can vaguely understand.

“—WHY I'M SWITCHING CHANNELS FASTER THAN THE CHANNELS ON TV—” It's the same as when I first found myself in this dimension. The giant worker arms that seemed to be cleaning up the amusement park: they picked up garbage cans, among other things, but they were rough in handling things, so they would drop stuff all over the place. And, for some reason, the stuff they pick up happens to be TVs a lot of the time... The things that dropped have been blown around and gathered here. They've been dropped from a long ways up, so most of them are broken; they've all got damage, like cracks down the screen, or dents in places.

From those TVs, the most intact ones, or the ones that looked the cutest, were gathered and piled together. There wasn't any real meaning to the collection, much like a child who picks up rocks or pretty glass pieces and shells

by the roadside. A small child's treasure, who would forget about it in a day given the chance. Adults wouldn't be able to find value in it, a mountain of junk... Sitting at the top of it was a single girl, who looked like she was having fun while singing. **"I'M black THEN I'M white, NO!!!"** She spread her arms, then lowered them again in exaggerated motions. Then she looked straight at me, who looked miserable and wretched. She was just watching, like she was killing time. Her mouth was twisted in the shape of a smile.

It was like looking into a mirror of myself when I was working at the store, watching a fairly pleasant TV show without really paying attention. Was I making the same face, I wondered? I don't know why, but I became awfully uneasy. I'm not a TV show, to be broadcast for someone else's amusement.

"SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT!!" she sang out, and I was surprised enough to forget my discomfort. The one singing on top of a mountain of TVs— no matter how I looked at her, she was Torii, with black hair which was unkempt and unstyled. Her spine was stretched straight, so she looked huge. She was wearing my school's uniform, too, only it was clean. For some reason, her neck was tilted oddly. And yet her hair was drooping downwards, obeying the laws of gravity. Because of that, her lovely features, which were usually hidden, were now on full display. Was Torii always this beautiful? She was like a different person. No, clearly she's acting strangely.



Torii should have been heavily wounded, enough that she couldn't move. We gave her emergency treatment with stuff like towels, and put her broken right arm into a splint. But from what I'm seeing, Torii isn't injured at all. There aren't even any scars; she's clean.

It's as if Torii had been born just now, looking as she did. In the first place, she was almost mortally wounded; there's no way she'd be able to move. *Why is she in a place like this, I wonder? Why is she singing? I don't understand!* Or rather, I was almost certain that she had been killed off by Kurashima while we were on the Ferris wheel. I decided that on my own, and because of that didn't actually check. I'm an awful person. And she said I was a kind girl...

That's wrong, I realized. That's not it. Something is strange. Chills ran down my spine. I'm looking at something unnatural; my instincts were ringing alarms. That's no good. I shouldn't get involved with that thing. At the same time, I felt a very familiar sensation.

It wasn't because she was Torii. I never even talked to her at school. It was that, ever since I found myself in this dimension, I'd been feeling someone's gaze the whole time. *Someone was watching me*, that was the feeling I'd gotten. Eventually I got used to it and forgot, and the sensation stopped rising to the surface of my thoughts. From the beginning to the end, she was— this thing was— watching me, I think, without any real curiosity. Its gaze was just absentmindedly bored, like it had nothing else to do... That was how it appeared now; it looked listless.

■CHANNEL40■

"You're—" Gently, I lay Kousuke down, and mussed at his hair one last time. Alone, I headed towards the mountain of TVs. It wasn't far; I got there just by walking a bit. I looked up. "What? Who are you? Torii-san...?" Confused and anxious, I questioned it like an infant.

The thing that looked like Torii tilted its head even further. I didn't feel like my words were getting through— this feeling, I remember it. "TV girl?" Impulsively, I spoke her name. That thing looked like a girl and a TV combined, I've encountered several times while in this alternate dimension. She was probably

the same as the smartbug and the giant slug... I had thought that they were probably monsters that lived inside the amusement park, though. Apparently, its condition is strange, because we're outside of the amusement park... And she looks like Torii. I waited a bit, but there was no response so I got impatient... It was the moment I opened my mouth again to speak.

"Ahh, right... Yeah, somehow, I understand," said the girl, using Torii's voice.

I didn't actually think she'd reply, so I stepped back, startled. It looks like I established dialogue with the person inside the TV screen. "Uhh, you're Torii-san, right?" I asked uncertainly.

"It's been so long, I can't remember clearly..." she mused. "Ah, that's right. It's like this, yeah. I get it. It's fine. Wait a bit, even if you say that there might not be anything I can do about it, though." She was speaking somewhat brokenly, saying stuff that didn't fit into a single conversation. It was like trying to pull on the antenna to fix things somehow when the signal for your TV is bad... She was making unfathomable movements, bending her arms and fingers around. Eventually, she looked at me again, her neck still bent at an angle. "It's been a while since I've last had a conversation, really... It's bothersome, after all. When you say TV girl, do you mean me? The people I met before called me **PRIMADONNA**, though."

Primadonna? Ballet? I felt like our conversations weren't meshing at all, and I became a little scared. I don't want to have to talk to somebody who I can't properly communicate with. It's creepy.

"This is called, 'Torii-san,' you say?" She patted her body over and over, grumbling mysteriously. "Ahh, it's fine. Even if you don't answer the question, I understand. I borrowed this child's body, for a bit." She shifted into a posture that was as close as she could get to lying sprawled out on the mountain of TVs; what bad manners.

This impostor with the face of Torii— probably the TV girl— continued to talk unilaterally. "This is mine," she said, "but there's not much life left in it anymore... It's going to die soon, so I can't talk for long. So please don't ask too many questions, okay?"

She'll die soon. Certainly, Torii was heavily wounded, although I had thought

that Kurashima finished her off already. Murder is incredibly stressful. Maybe he left her alone because he thought if he did she'd die eventually, anyway. And the TV girl is controlling Torii, who's in that state?

Yawning, Torii turned away. The outside is the same, but the insides have been switched out. I guess it's like she's possessed, or something? This far outstrips my understanding, though. But at the very least, I can kind of talk to her. At the merry-go-round, the fires avoided TV girl. Could she possibly be someone important in this amusement park? Or something like that, maybe. If I negotiate well enough, she might be willing to let me outside. At the very least, I can stop being stuck, battered in this wasteland.

She told me not to ask her too many questions, but I couldn't endure it and shouted, "What are you? What is this place? Hey, please tell me! What was that stuff, it's cruel, I hate this! Get me home, let me out of here!"

"Be quiet... Don't fuss, I'll get you home properly." Frowning at the noise, Torii made a gesture, like she was plugging her ears. It was as if she was a scolded child. "That amusement park, it's like a feeding ground. A small world, made for us to eat you, like a dining table. When you die in your world, you guys get thrown into this— our world." She talked brokenly about stuff that I found hard to understand. "This time, it's an amusement park by chance. Depending on our tastes, as well as the people thrown in, the feeding grounds change. In one part of this world that stretches on infinitely, a limited dining table is built, and then appropriately managed until all those inside are eaten."

"So this place is, as I thought... A world after death, or something like that?" I guessed. So if we die, we don't go to heaven or hell— we go to this baffling alternate dimension. No, is this place heaven and/or hell? *The* world after death? There, the dead are devoured by bizarre monsters. I *had* thought that we weren't the intended audience for this amusement park, but to think we were simply feed... So we were just like popcorn, or ice cream, or other foods that would be sold in an amusement park.

As one would expect, I wasn't able to keep my cool, and Torii was watching me, with her head still tilted to the side. "You guys do that, too, right? Put a bug in a cage, and watch it until it dies?" she asked. "You call this 'raising it.' Or something like that, probably. It's no fun if I just eat you straight away, you

know? Although sometimes I fight and play with you.” She said something disgusting as if it was to be expected. “There are also times I just eat them quickly, too. This time, just a liiittle bit...I rewound, and threw you guys into the cage in a healthy state. Well, in the end, you guys didn’t really kill each other much, and mostly just sat still so it was boring, though.”

“What do you mean, ‘rewound?’” I felt some hope at the way she said it, so I endured the creepiness and asked. “Like, healing wounds? Or, reviving someone? If that’s the case, please, Kagamimori-san, Kousuke, and Torii are... Put them back the way they were! Bring them back to life, please!” Kurashima *was* the one who almost killed me, so honestly, there is a part of me that wants him to die already, but...I had hope that maybe we could go home without losing anything, with no one dying, if those things that were like a TV and a living thing mixed together had supernatural powers.

At the same time, I somehow understood that we were rewound just a little... It isn’t clear how rewinding actually works, though. For example, if we were rewound to the time just before we were caught in the fire... If our memories were rewound, too.

Various things start falling into place. I only remembered up until being bored in the store. The others also, at the shrine, Utena and Torii were attacked by Kurashima... Perhaps, if they were killed by him, they would have remembered that. If so, they would probably have been more wary of Kurashima. Even Utena probably wouldn’t have believed what Kurashima said, and have jumped.

We were rewound and lost various things, forgetting about them. That’s why we started from building up our relationships, with something easygoing like self-introductions. All because of a dumb reason like, ‘It’s more fun to watch if they’re healthy.’

■CHANNEL41■

“I can’t. I can’t rewind someone whose death has already been decided. I only rewound you a little because it would have been more fun to watch if you were healthy and moving around. In the end, you’ll be eaten by us. That’s already been decided.” Torii put up her right arm, and stroked the surface of it. The

arm, which should have been broken, had probably been restored by rewinding.

“I don’t like pain... So I temporarily rewound this girl,” the TV girl explained. “I wanted to talk to you, after all. In order to do that I had to borrow this girl’s body, or rather, her brain, because it’s impossible if I don’t borrow her capacity for language. Once I’m done, I’m going to put her back to the instant she dies. You could say she’s already dead, and I can’t overturn that.” It was a clear refusal. I had no choice but to be dejected. Even if I threw a fit here, these transcendental beings probably wouldn’t empathize and save them, even on a whim.

They’re predators, and we’re food, so I can’t demand something as if I’m important. I should probably just be thankful that I can talk with her like this, because there aren’t many humans that would talk to a bug with love. She’s just talking one-sidedly, and making it look like a dialogue. No matter how hard I will it, the tale being shown on the TV screen won’t change.

There was that kind of separation. There was a distance, and I didn’t have the means to cross over it. There’s a part of me that can’t give up, but I did feel that it would be fruitless. No matter how much a bug cries, humans would probably only scowl.

“It’s already decided who will eat who,” TV girl explained. “This girl is mine. The others are for someone else to eat. I can’t do as I like to someone else’s food.” “You’re all, what? By the others, you mean— like that giant monkey, and that slug?” Those monsters that looked like a fusion of living thing and TV, and that shared a similar aura. A strange ecosystem that I can’t understand seems to have been formed in this alternate dimension.

Torii must have gotten tired of talking; she didn’t even try to hide her annoyed behavior. “Nnn~... the ‘Winged Bug’ is in charge of ‘Mishiro Kousuke,’ over there. The ‘Slug’ is in charge of that, you know, ‘Kurashima Yuudai.’ The ‘Monkey’ has ‘Kagamimori Utena.’ Everybody has their own meal. That was the agreement. I’m in charge of this one, ‘Saba Torii.’”

I was convinced by that explanation. Kurashima said that the monsters that were a combination of TV and living thing, were low on intelligence, and were

like obedient pets that would listen to orders. But he's wrong, it's the opposite; those monsters were in charge of each of us, and they were moving us around, playing.

They weren't listening to our orders— they were amused by them, and had decided to grant our wishes. Like a person going, 'You're hopeless,' as he drips honey for a hungry bug. If we went too far or soured their mood, they'd probably have crushed us without mercy. In other words, they were playing with us and pitting us against each other. They treated us like chess pieces, moving us by provoking us in different ways... They were playing, and just happened to help us as a result. They fiddled with us for fun, and watched and laughed at us as we moved around in confusion.

The monsters were higher up on the ladder. It's not like I was given an explanation about that, though. It's all stuff that we guessed at after searching around on our own. Well, apart from Kousuke and Kurashima... We had no way of knowing that there were players moving us. Of course, we hadn't even imagined that we were being used.

But, if I'm remembering correctly, that giant monkey listened to Utena. It was because that thing was in charge of her. When she screamed for it to stop, it stopped its assault on Torii, no matter how reluctantly. And the reason it attacked her in the first place, was because Utena expressed her displeasure at Torii for hugging her while they slept, and she wished for her to disappear, I guess. Somehow, the pieces are falling into place.

Even Kousuke and Kurashima had never imagined the ghastly plan that was happening, and only got as far as thinking of the monsters as something that would listen to them. Aside from those boys, who enjoyed these game-like aspects, we girls hadn't come close to figuring it out, either.

That we were only food, playthings, and insects. I didn't want to imagine it, much less know.

"But— TV girl, you're in charge of Torii-san, right? Why were you always watching me...?" That was something I was a little stuck on; I don't remember the TV girl being that proactively involved in playing with us. That's why Torii, who she was supposed to be in charge of, was left alone with no protection at

all. She was hit by another player, the monkey, and heavily wounded.

“I don’t really like this boy’s game.” The monster wearing Torii’s face played with her fingers, looking bored. “More than that, it was more fun to watch you. Although it was only at the level where it wasn’t boring... You weren’t supposed to be here in the first place, after all.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Unable to figure out what she meant, I was confused.

“The other ones are all dead,” TV girl said. “That’s why they came to this world. But you aren’t dead at all, yet. However, something got mixed up, and you came here with them. Sometimes, that sort of thing happens... Were you close by when the others died?”

Aahh, I sighed. What the heck? I really *was* someone completely unrelated. From Kousuke and Kurashima’s stories, the other girls were there, but there had been no mention of me. I just happened to have been Kousuke’s childhood friend, and also from the same school as the others.

From the perspective of connection, I was apart. That was because I really was unrelated from the start. Because I was in my home, which was right next to the shrine where the fire was, I got caught in it...and just found myself in this alternate dimension. The fact that I cried, got hurt, and found myself in tatters seems stupid now.

Once again, I can feel laughter welling out of me. The monster twisted her lips into the form of a smile, like it was imitating me. “That’s why you can go back to your world,” she told me, “because no one is in charge of you.”

At those words, I stopped my laughter and looked up at her. I can go back? I can escape, from this dimension? “The boys were saying that the last one alive after they all kill each other... That the winner would get you as a prize, that was the plan. They were all excited. But if they eat two, then their stomachs won’t hold, and I feel sorry for you, too.” She said something that was unlike a monster, probably on a whim.

That logic had a child’s innocence to it. There were parts that were hard to understand, but I didn’t think that way. She simply took pity on an insect that had gotten caught in a trap, even though it had nothing to do with it... It was

like trying to quietly let one of the insects out of the cage.

“The boys will probably complain. But the only ones alive right now are the girl I’m in charge of, and that Kurashima guy the snail is in charge of. Well, that guy is the one closer to death... After this, I’m going to control this girl and kill him.” She talked like it was a chore. “And then it’ll be my win. As the winner, what I do with my prize is up to me; both to eat or to let free. That’s why I’ll let you go, and you’ll be able to get out of here.” The girl hit one of the TVs near her lightly, with her palm; static ran across its screen. It showed a small, bare room that reminded me of the control room. It’s an unfamiliar interior, and I wonder where it is.

While I was watching it, the door to the small room opened, and a woman, whose face had gone pale, entered. She was wearing work clothes. I don’t remember her— no, I have a feeling I know this woman. I feel like I’ve seen her somewhere. Searching through my memories, I was astonished. The postcard that Utena showed me in the gondola of the Ferris wheel...

“I don’t know where this is,” TV girl said, “but it’s your world. Go back from this screen. Be as fast as possible, okay...? I’m getting this girl, so I’m satisfied for now, but I don’t know what I’ll do if I get hungry. I’ve had my eye on this girl for a looong time now.” Preciously, the monster caressed her own— Torii’s— flesh, like a small child showing off a rare bug they found on the side of the road.

“MY ENEMY’S INVISIBLE, I DON’T KNOW HOW TO FIGHT” From the back of her throat, her singing voice overflowed. **“THE TREMBLING FEAR IS MORE THAN I CAN TAKE”** She sang neatly, with enumerated sounds. **“WHEN I’M UP AGAINST THE ECHO IN THE MIRROR”** Singing those bizarre and obtuse phrases, she laughed sweetly. “A long time ago...I heard it from far away. This song, from the other side of the TV. I was bored, just letting the days pass by me. It comforted my heart. It was my only pleasure, and this child gave it to me.” The monster— whom I’d met in an alternate dimension— smiled happily. “That singing voice echoes inside me, even now, inside my stomach. That’s why I’m fine, even if I don’t eat a lot. That’s why, I’m letting you go.”

Epilogue

■ECHO10■

Denkiya Hitomi, the girl with a slightly strange name, was sent to the hospital by ambulance, just in case.

That being said, it was apparent that she only had things like light scrapes and burns... In other words, that she was healthy and whole. She was exhausted, weak, emaciated, and haggard, so the doctors recommended she stay in the hospital. They'd wanted to keep an eye on her, but she firmly insisted on going home, instead. And because Denkiya herself didn't want to stay, and there was no reason she *had* had to go to the hospital in the first place... The hospital decided to respect her wishes.

That being said, she was still a material witness in an inexplicable incident. She was a minor, and incredibly confused as well, but the police questioned her anyway, just in case.

However, Denkiya wasn't well enough for questioning, so the police were having trouble figuring out what to ask and how... They ended up doing it the cumbersome way, and waited for another day, when she was calmer. The day was already ending, and they couldn't keep her restrained for long. In reality, it was the time for children to go back to their homes.

"Aaahh—" She was in a common cafe near the hospital where the police interview was being held. Even though Sayuri didn't normally interact with people if she could help it, the police were very persistent in their questioning, so she was left feeling completely exhausted. Sayuri is one of the victim's bereaved family, so they didn't treat her as a suspect, though. But somehow, she had found Denkiya Hitomi, a survivor in a baffling situation— although Sayuri wasn't sure if that was what you would call it. She wasn't sure if they were suspicious of that or something else, but they'd questioned her about it insistently.

Sayuri herself didn't know what was going on, though. She'd heard that her daughter had died, and had come to town in a panic. Then, she'd seen the grotesque corpse in the morgue of the police station. She was told to try and find her daughter, somehow, in the mass that looked like several boys and girls

condensed into one, and she had been troubled in the extreme. Really, there was no way to compare it.

Denkiya Hitomi came out of that— from inside of the corpses, as if she was crawling out of it. Sayuri didn't understand the meaning of that phenomenon. The police, too, were nothing but bewildered.

Being asked about the details of that event so thoroughly, unable to say anything but platitudes like, 'I don't know,' and 'I'm surprised, too'... Sayuri was left not yet feeling the reality of her daughter's death; only time was moving on. Having already reduced several cigarettes into ash, Sayuri put the last one into her mouth, and slowly, slowly, she breathed out smoke.

"That must have been hard." For some reason, the one consoling her was Denkiya Hitomi, who was sitting across from her. Even though she kept insisting that she wanted to go home, for some reason she's been staying in the cafe, watching Sayuri.

Denkiya Hitomi didn't have any really outstanding features, but she was still a pretty girl. She said that she was a high schooler, the same age as her daughter. She had an average physique for her age. For whatever reason, Denkiya was wearing a branded apron that said, "Monochrome Electronics" on it. And just earlier, she had taken off the bandana on her head— it was probably in the way. She had folded it, and currently had the bandana sitting on her lap.

Overall, she was a plain-looking girl, but her black hair was both glossy and pretty. Although, as one would expect, she must not have had time to fix her hair. It was disheveled, and here and there she had hair sticking out as if she had just been sleeping.

"Sorry for smoking this much." There were people who hated tobacco, so just in case, Sayuri excused herself. It was the last one, after all. And since she had already lit it, she wanted to finish it. Getting cigarettes up in the mountains is hard; she had to treasure every one.

While letting that and other inconsequential thoughts run through her head, Sayuri scratched at her scalp. Now wasn't the time to be thinking of these things— she just couldn't calm down. It was like she was seeing a dream.

"My bad," Sayuri apologized again. "You had something you wanted to talk

about? ...Uhhh, Denkiya-san.” Sayuri had been detained by Hitomi’s desperate invitation. So now, they were seated across from each other in a cafe, facing each other like this. Apparently under the apron, Hitomi was wearing the same uniform as her daughter’s, but she had never met Hitomi until now, so Sayuri was bewildered. Even if she said she had something she wanted to talk about, Sayuri couldn’t imagine what it was.

“Please, call me Hitomi. I don’t like being called by my last name. It’s not like I hate my parents— but it’s like a joke, isn’t it? Because my family owns an electronics store.” In reality, Hitomi got along quite well with her parents. They say that her parents, who were on a business trip to the city, are in the middle of rushing back after hearing that their daughter was caught in an accident. Although if they were in the city, it’ll take quite a while by train; this town isn’t just rural, it’s remote.

This child doesn’t seem to have any siblings or family, so until her parents return... She’s alone, she must be feeling lonely. Sayuri thought to at least be a partner in conversation. “I hated my last name, too, when I was young—” When Sayuri said that, unable to think of an appropriate reply, Hitomi tilted her head.

“Umm, I don’t mean to be rude, but...” Hitomi asked, “is ‘Hanemori Joururi’ your real name?”

“Before that,” Sayuri clarified. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Where, you say— I can’t really explain it well,” Hitomi apologized. “It’ll be a long story, do you want to hear it?”

“Yes,” the older woman affirmed. “I’m gonna be the one to look after you until your parents come back. If talking will take your mind off it, talk all you want. ...Would you like some coffee or something?”

“Sorry. It must be hard for you too, Hanemori-san. You lost your daughter, after all.”

“Don’t call me Hanemori,” Sayuri instructed, “although it’s not like I really hate my last name.” Flagging down an employee, Sayuri ordered coffee. It looked like Hitomi was hungry, so she got sandwiches, too. Sayuri came down without eating, so she was also hungry, but right now she didn’t feel like she’d be able to swallow a thing. Her daughter had died.

While showing concern for Sayuri, Hitomi started to talk, intermittently, about a very curious story: getting lost in an alternate dimension, and the boys and girls she met there. It was a tragic, dark and creepy story that defied common sense. Sayuri was unable to digest it well.

Didn't she just see a nightmare or something? she thought.

Hitomi had crawled her way out of a weird corpse. Even that, Sayuri was thinking that she might have just been seeing things. But Hitomi spoke so seriously, so earnestly, that Sayuri started thinking that it may just be true. It's not like denying Hitomi's story would solve anything.

■ECHO11■

Sayuri listened to Hitomi's story seriously until the end, and by then the coffee and sandwiches were long gone. It was already almost closing time; they couldn't stay and talk much longer. The other customers had all already gone home, and the employees who were left were giving the two of them slightly annoyed looks. Turning on the TV placed up near the ceiling, a baseball game was being broadcast.

"An amusement park, huh—" While feeling slightly uncomfortable, Sayuri digested Hitomi's story. Apparently, the alternate dimension— or whatever she spoke of— can be thought of as the hearts of people who get lost inside. It was a dream, or a place where their spirits were mixed together, or something. Things happened, like watching someone else's dream on a monitor because of crossed wires or something...

Sayuri felt like she could make a guess, somehow, as to why the alternate dimension was an amusement park. She hadn't been in the prenatal phase, but while her daughter was still in her belly, she must have also felt that moment in the past that had changed Sayuri's life for good. The amusement park, where Sayuri was strangled by her abominable childhood friend... That left a strong image, and it must have been inherited by Sayuri's daughter, turning that dimension into an amusement park.

While thinking that, Sayuri asked something absentmindedly; "Well, saying I believe your story for now. What do you want to ask of me, then? Are you

unsatisfied with something, Denkiya-sa— ...Hitomi-chan?”

“If you’re talking about satisfaction, then I’m unsatisfied with all of it. I don’t understand any of it... It couldn’t be helped that I, an outsider, was caught up in all this by chance, though.” Without looking at the TV, Hitomi faced Sayuri directly. “I didn’t think you’d believe me. Not with a story this stupid.”

“Yeah,” Sayuri sighed. “If I was to believe your story, then the culprit who set the shrine on fire, and who probably killed my daughter and the others would be that Kurashima-kun, or whatever he’s called. But even if you told the police, I don’t think they’d believe you.” “The weapon would have been a knife or something similar, if they looked for it they might find it... So wouldn’t the culprit be revealed, eventually, if they searched the scene of the crime, anyway? I hear that the Japanese police are excellent, after all.” At the scene of the fire, a corpse that was several boys and girls blended together was found... If someone just listened to the outline, it would sound mysterious, but if they didn’t think of the alternate dimension stuff, then it should just be a normal incident. Kurashima Yuudai, Saba Torii, Kagamimori Utena, and Mishiroy Kousuke were dead. They wouldn’t figure out if the victims died in the fire, or were killed before that without further investigation, but seeing as how the culprit Kurashima Yuudai is dead, the case is already closed.

If the police investigate with due diligence, then they should reach a realistic explanation for the whole thing. The complicated mess of bodies will be properly untangled, and sent to the bereaved families for their funerals. They’ll most likely decide something like the intense heat of the fire melted the bodies together by coincidence. And with that reasoning put on it, the incident will end.

So that corpse, those are the leftovers that the monsters didn’t touch...maybe? Just that was thrown back into the world, like trash. There was no one to eat Hitomi, so she came back whole. That was probably it, though the fact that Sayuri could only make conjectures vexed her.

“I think I know what Kurashima-kun’s— or whatever he’s called— motivation was, too.” When she said that, Hitomi’s eyes turned into circles. Sayuri laughed bitterly, and lowered her head. “It was probably my fault. A looong time ago, I was an idol. It probably doesn’t look that way, does it? I retired quite a while

back, and now I'm just an old lady; you can find those anywhere."

"You're plenty beautiful even now, though," Hitomi reassured her.

"Nothing will come of it, even if you praise me... Hmm, you don't know anything about Hanemori Joururi, right? I don't think any of the young kids these days would know, after all." The Kagamimoris,' the richest family in town, scion— now the head of the family— was involved in the scandal that ended Hanemori Joururi. He was probably trying to erase the past. It was taboo to speak the name 'Hanemori Joururi,' especially in this town. There was no way to know about her, especially in the younger generations.

Hitomi tilted her head, troubled, as she asked Sayuri, who was lost in thought: "You're talking like this is about someone else. You're Hanemori Joururi, right?"

"Yeah, well, that is true." To Sayuri, her idol years were something that she didn't want to remember. So whenever she did, she was put into a bitter mood. It's already in the past, so she did think of it like something that happened to someone else. To think that she had worn cute outfits, and danced and sung on stage... It was unbelievable, like it had happened in a past life.

"When I was around your age, I got scouted by someone from a TV station in the city. I debuted with a lot of fanfare, and went on, just like that, to become a huge success without any trouble; I became a celebrity in one go. No matter what channel you flipped to on the TV, it would've been filled with talk about Hanemori Joururi." Sayuri already wanted to smoke another cigarette, but she was out. Enduring the urge, Sayuri talked vaguely. "Around then, computers— or actually the internet— weren't widespread at all, yet. There was no such thing as smartphones, either. The only thing there was to reflect the outside world was TV. Its influence was staggering, although I didn't really feel it at the time." At the time, she had just been an ignorant girl— the Sayuri of that time, Hanemori Joururi.

"I remember hearing the name Kurashima," Sayuri went on. "She was the idol who was treated as my rival, back then. Well, it was a rigged race, or a fixed fight, if you will... She was an idol on the wane at the time, so she was put in showdowns on lots of different TV shows." Now that she thought about it, she'd done something pathetic, but at the time Sayuri was just doing as she was

told. She had thought the other side was content with what was happening, too — in the end, it was just a job. Sayuri had never even imagined that her actions could warp others lives. “I was undefeated,” she explained, “and beat Kurashima-san black and blue. I beat her, trampled on her, and relished my triumph. And the world admired me that way. Kurashima-san retired like that, and was soon forgotten by everyone. I, too, had forgotten her until just now.”

But she, Kurashima, most likely hadn’t forgotten. Not Hanemori Joururi, who kicked her down and ate and scattered her remains, before brilliantly climbing up to the seat of Top Idol. She hated Hanemori and held a grudge, and her son had inherited that grudge. It was probably an education close to brainwashing. Saying, “I despise Hanemori Joururi, she is hateful, I want to kill her...” If she had kept saying that since he was a baby, it would take root in the boy’s soul.

The pitiful son turned into a demon of revenge, and rode all the way to such a remote town on his motorcycle for his mother’s vengeance. He was a pious son, but also outdated to think of revenge in these times, even though it’s been a long time since vengeance was forbidden by law. But the person himself was probably deadly serious about it— It might have been one of his life goals. His looks were outstanding, and he was, or at least had been, a performer of sorts. So even if he didn’t stain his hands with crime, he should have been able to lead a relatively happy life. He hadn’t given up on his mother’s revenge, though, and so he caused a tragedy.

“If that’s the case, he should have gotten even with the person herself,” Sayuri said, “rather than put his hands on my daughter.”

“Hrmmmm. Maybe he wanted Hanemori Joururi to taste the feeling of something precious being stolen... Kurashima-san himself is dead, so I can only guess, though,” Hitomi said, sounding as if she was worried about Sayuri, even though everything was Sayuri’s fault. No, it might just be that no one was at fault; if one was to force a conclusion, then it would be the fault of the era. In order to produce a single super idol, the world of show business spared no effort. Countless corpses were piled high as sacrifices, feed to Hanemori Joururi. Kurashima, too, was one of those. She was firewood, in order to make Hanemori Joururi shine brighter. She was thrown into the fire, and forgotten. The flames of hatred, born in her from that moment, were inherited by her son

in her womb.

“According to Kousuke, Kurashima-san looked like he was searching for something, though,” Hitomi said thoughtfully. “So he was looking for the daughter of Hanemori Joururi...for Kagamimori-san.”

“Ah— I think he was mistaken about that part, though.” While feeling sorry for interrupting Hitomi, Sayuri corrected her. “My daughter’s name is Saba. Utena-chan isn’t— she isn’t connected to me by blood. The story is a little embarrassing, but a long time ago I was a stupid girl,” Sayuri admitted, although she didn’t want to talk about such an indecent subject to a high schooler, who still had her purity. “I was someone’s mistress. To the scion of the Kagamimori family, to be exact. He and I were childhood friends, as well. We were lovers before I even debuted as an idol. I was a fool who didn’t think about anything, so I had thought that we’d stay that way forever.” Letting a sigh spill from her lips, Sayuri rubbed at the nape of her neck. The traces of when, a long time ago, she was strangled by a childhood friend that she should’ve at least tentatively loved, were throbbing. “It’s no good, when you’re separated. He had his own life to think of, so he married someone his parents decided on, and I didn’t know that. We did what we did, and I got pregnant. In the eyes of the world it was adultery, and when the pregnancy was discovered... It became a scandal, and that was the end of Hanemori Joururi.” Miming decapitation, Sayuri said it like a joke, deceiving the scars that hurt even now.

If she didn’t at least phrase it like a funny story, she wouldn’t be able to stand it. “So that was the cause of my retirement. It might still be the same now, but the world back then was fussy about that sort of thing; the ethics of being an idol. The office was kind enough to ban smoking, though. Because it would’ve been impossible while I was pregnant.” She retired flashily, plastered all over not just weekly magazines, but the national newspapers, too. Even at her worst, Hanemori Joururi was a super idol turned social phenomenon— the uproar was endlessly large. People set fire to her office, and for some reason there were even suicides. Hanemori Joururi’s influence was just that large. Exactly because she was loved all over Japan, when she fell it was all the way to rock bottom, and she wasn’t even able to walk the streets. Sayuri had secretly returned here, to her rural hometown— and she had been living in seclusion up until now.

“But well, it’s not like I could take back my pregnancy,” Sayuri continued. “I had my daughter, and raised her. I had enough money that I could play around my whole life and still not spend it all, so raising her wasn’t a problem. That was Torii, my daughter, whom I shared my blood with.” And she was dead. Repeating that over and over, the reality of it settled heavily over Sayuri’s shoulders. She had thought that she’d lost everything, when Hanemori Joururi retired— Sayuri had died, once. Even though that was wrong, even though she had her daughter. From Sayuri’s belly, which had felt like anything and everything had been torn out of her, came a small speck of life. And even that had been stolen. Right now, Sayuri had nothing left to her but her own flesh and life.

“No one would help me,” Sayuri remembered. “Even my own parents disinherited me, saying that I had a lack of filial piety. I had trouble, but well, I did my best in raising my daughter. I wasn’t doing a great job of it, though,” Sayuri finished, before muttering under her breath, “She died, after all, that girl.” Getting unexpectedly sad, Sayuri cried. Letting out a sob, her tears spilled forth. It was like a hole had been opened up in her stomach; she’d never thought, never imagined that she would feel like this.

To Sayuri, her daughter was her entire life. Of course, she also resented her child, at times. Because she had housed her daughter in her belly, she fell from the path of glory. But, that kind of thing... Her daughter should have been precious enough to easily trade the fame and vacant shine of being a super idol. If only Sayuri had loved her more. It’s too late to regret now.

“Sorry.” Hitomi apologized for some reason, using a paper napkin to wipe Sayuri’s face. She was a good child. Her parents had probably taught her well. If Torii had been born into their house... Would she have been happier? If she hadn’t been born as the daughter of a dropout from life, a worn-out woman. She would never have come to an end as cruel as becoming a meal for an eerie monster in another dimension...

No. When humans died, they would just go to the dimension where monsters ran rampant. And there, they would be food. Is this the world’s providence? If

so, it's unpleasant, to say the least. There were no hopes or dreams. To think something like that was the world after death. "It's a weird way to say it," Hitomi said, "but there's a lot I understand, now."

After hesitating a little, Hitomi patted Sayuri's head, saying, "There, there." She was being comforted by someone the same age as her daughter; Sayuri was feeling considerably pathetic. Even though Sayuri was supposed to be the one to listen to Hitomi talk, before comforting her. Even though Sayuri was older than her by a generation. This girl probably got a little stronger, after experiencing such harsh events in the other dimension. Unlike Sayuri, who acted as if she hadn't grown at all since she was just an ignorant girl. "Your daughter—" Hitomi began. "Torii-san, was being bullied at school."

"Yes. You did say that," Sayuri agreed regretfully. "Really, I'm a failure as a mother, aren't I? I didn't know. That is, until you told me."

"Don't beat yourself up about it too much, please," Hitomi requested, hanging her head sadly. "There's no point in doing that anymore, after all."

That's right, Sayuri realized. Her daughter was dead. it's too late now. Her daughter had been bullied at school. There had been signs: her daughter lost things, or got hurt. She'd just thought that her daughter was a fool, and didn't think too very deeply about it, even though her daughter was living in hell. "She was being bullied by Utena-chan, you said," Sayuri said at last. She could figure out the details on her own. Utena was the daughter of the Kagamimoris. She was a child from a previous marriage of the spouse of the head of the family, who was the childhood friend of Sayuri, and a person she loved in her own way. That's why she wasn't related to Sayuri by blood at all, though.

It was probably sheer coincidence that Utena had learned of Sayuri's existence. It might have been that her father had lingering attachments, and kept an album of their memories. Utena had embraced her curiosity, researched the subject, and come out of it with the name of the super idol, Hanemori Joururi. And so, she admired idols.

"Someone her father had once loved" was not something Sayuri could say with certainty. But she had been a partner with a deep enough relationship to leave behind a child. Therefore, Utena might have felt a bond of fate with

Sayuri. She must not have known that she was a child from her mother's previous marriage; that she might just be the daughter of Hanemori Joururi, was probably a delusion of her youth. She might have thought something like, *Because my relationship with my mother isn't good, I might have an actual mother somewhere else.* But since Utena was already dead, Sayuri could only imagine her thoughts. It seemed that Utena had called Hanemori Joururi, "Mother," so she must be at least mostly on the right track. While misunderstanding something fundamental, the girl adored Hanemori Joururi, and thus aimed to be an idol to follow in her footsteps, all while hallucinating a blood bond that didn't exist.

Sayuri could also understand the great joy Utena felt when Kurashima Yuudai offered to introduce her to a talent agency in the city. From a remote town, to getting discovered by someone from a TV station by chance, to being a magnificent success in the city; it would have been like re-tracing the events of Hanemori Joururi's debut. Utena must have thought that she, too, could become like that. Sick of her boring life in a rural town, Utena had dreamed of a Cinderella story.

In reality, it was unknown if Kurashima Yuudai had connections to a talent agency, and if he was in a position to scout anybody. It might have just been some appropriate lie in order to trick Utena, who had believed him. So, in order to fulfill her dream, she'd treated her meeting with Kurashima Yuudai as an opportunity, and was delighted. But in the end, Utena had been betrayed, and she had died. It was a story cruel enough to make Sayuri hesitate to simply sum it up as being pitiful. One could also say that Utena simply got her hopes up based off of a selfish assumption, spun her wheels fruitlessly, and met with misfortune. To think that she had admired someone like Sayuri... Sayuri couldn't even pity Utena, who lost her life so young. She only felt more hopeless.

If that was the case, then the log house crammed full of idol goods that Sayuri found deep in the mountains must have been Utena's. That place was a palace that Utena had built for her dreams. Utena had admired Sayuri that much, and yet Sayuri hadn't even exchanged a word with her. Even after knowing that Utena had been bullying her daughter, Sayuri couldn't find it in herself to hate

the girl.

If they were going to do it, Sayuri wished they had done it to her. Both Kurashima Yuudai and Utena, if they were going to hurt her daughter— even kill her— then Sayuri wished that she had been the victim, instead. Kurashima’s revenge for the idol that Hanemori Joururi once trampled over could be said to have been successful. Sayuri was feeling just awful. It would have been better if she was dead.

■ECHO13■

“I don’t think Kagamimori-san was the one bullying Torii-san,” Hitomi murmured abruptly. “I mean, Torii-san didn’t seem like she resented Kagamimori-san at all. Instead she tried to protect her, and held her while they slept... It looked like she loved her.” Hearing those words, Sayuri raised her head. Hitomi simply watched Sayuri with pure eyes, concerned. “Sure, Kagamimori-san might have hated Torii-san. She was the real daughter of the idol Utena looked up to. The daughter of the woman she had thought was her mother... And in fact, Kagamimori-san wasn’t connected by blood to Hanemori Joururi at all. She was a fake, they weren’t family.”

“Isn’t that why she resented my daughter and bullied her... Because she hated my daughter, who had what she wanted?” Sayuri asked. “Didn’t she persecute my daughter because she was jealous and bitter?”

“I don’t think Kagamimori-san was that big of a fool,” Hitomi disagreed. “She was a very level-headed girl, although I didn’t get to talk to her properly much... She had a dream, fell in love, and lived her life as best she could. She put in effort, straightforwardly, like a story’s protagonist. Such a girl wouldn’t bully others over something as dull as unjust resentment,” she said.

This is a child’s opinion, an idealism, Sayuri had thought. But somehow, she could understand what Hitomi was trying to say: Utena wasn’t the one who was bullying Torii. Rather, it had been those who were around her. Utena was the daughter of the Kagamimoris, and this town’s princess. There was probably no end to the people who were trying to get closer to her, flattering her and trying to curry favor. Those guys acted like they knew Utena’s complicated mentality,

and...

“Kagamimori-san is a girl without a hidden side. She wouldn’t have lied,” Hitomi explained. “She even revealed her dream of being an idol to me, someone whom she’d basically just met. Her circumstances probably leaked out into her surroundings.” It didn’t look like Hitomi could say for certain, though, because she hadn’t been that close with either Utena or Torii, and at school she’d kept her distance.

Utena admired idols— or just Hanemori Joururi in particular— and her real daughter had been attending the same school. She had what Utena wanted; the impertinence! Utena should have hated her. *For the sake of our lady, let’s beat down that eyesore. Let’s bully her, kick her down, and ridicule her.* Someone among Utena’s hangers-on had thought those things. In the age before the internet, there was no stopping the tide of rumors. No matter how taboo the name “Hanemori Joururi” was, in our town... That was in the past, and it had nothing to do with the children. They had fun investigating this and that, and bringing circumstances to light, before starting their attack.

Torii was a slightly weird girl that lived deep in the mountains. She was a pitiful girl who only had a mother. She was timid, and didn’t fight back. On paper, she was good prey. As long as there’s an excuse, people will start the cannibalism known as bullying, endlessly and forever. It was enough to make one think that the monsters in the alternate dimension, who firmly decided their share and only ate what they needed to, to be more upright and honest.

“This might also just be my imagination, but I wonder if Kagamimori-san talked to Torii-san in school, or something,” Hitomi pondered. “Trying to ask about her mother, Hanemori Joururi? She tried to interact with your daughter proactively, talking with her a lot and getting along with her... Kagamimori-san would be honest and open with relatively anyone, I would think.” Hitomi let out a sigh, sounding somewhat tired. If what she was talking about was true, then this *would* be right after she just escaped from an alternate dimension. There’s no way she wasn’t exhausted, but it was far too late to touch on that subject. She probably couldn’t move on without tidying up the stuff she didn’t understand.

“Kagamimori-san’s followers wouldn’t have been able to stomach that, I don’t

think,” Hitomi continued. “So they set their eyes on her because they thought she was conceited, and attacked her... But at the same time, Torii-san must have thought that Kagamimori-san ‘might be my little sister.’”

“Utena-chan was younger than Torii, after all. If Utena-chan really believed that Hanemori Joururi was her mother...” Sayuri trailed off for a moment. “Then, I see, that would make Utena-chan her younger sister.”

“But in reality, they weren’t connected by blood, though. That would be why Torii-san loved Kagamimori-san like a little sister,” Hitomi concluded. As for Kagamimori-san, if Torii-san hadn’t known much about Hanemori Joururi... She probably just felt like she’d taken a loss, having talked to her and gained nothing.”

“I didn’t tell her anything, after all,” Sayuri said. “Not about Hanemori Joururi.” It was all just Hitomi’s imagination, but if Sayuri thought of it that way, there were parts that made sense: Like, why Torii treated Utena kindly, when she was supposed to have been bullying her. Of course, there’s no way she didn’t feel anything after being abused. But, if it was just her followers, and Utena herself didn’t bully her at all... She might have had complicated feelings about it, but Torii shouldn’t have hated Utena that much, if at all. Torii was a kindhearted girl, who would want to raise the eggs of birds she found, and would put a blanket on her mother when she fell asleep while working. Actually, it wasn’t like Sayuri was a very good mother, either... Maybe Torii wanted the warmth of family, and so tried to get closer to Utena, even if she was hurt; even if she bled. Even if they weren’t related by blood, she had tried to love Utena, her little sister.

“Thinking of it that way, the aftertaste is just a little bit better...” Hitomi admitted. “That would be it, though. Sorry for talking for so long.”

“It’s fine. It looks like it’s closing time already, too...let’s take our time going home.” Hitomi smiled, and Sayuri gave a large yawn. Looking outside, it was already completely dark. The two of them should probably be heading home. Together.

“The girl Kousuke liked, I have a feeling it was Torii-san—” Hitomi said sadly; apparently, she wasn’t done talking. “I want to think that the girl wasn’t one of

Kagamimori-san's followers that took part in the bullying. Kousuke was always together with Kagamimori-san, so Torii-san would be the only one close enough, and she was a good person with a pure heart... You two really are related. Torii-san was beautiful, just like you, Sayuri-san."

"Wouldn't it be fine to just say that it was you, Hitomi-chan?" Sayuri said. This girl was still at the age where she enjoyed talking about love. *I'd rather she talk about this than a gloomy alternate dimension beyond understanding, or a sad story about bullying.* Thinking that, Sayuri gladly rode the subject. "Well, even if you thought about it now there'd be nothing you could do. There's plenty of men in the world. I...don't think you should be falling in love with your childhood friend anyway, speaking as someone who's tried that and failed. ...hm? What's wrong?"

Sayuri's voice might not have reached her, Hitomi was in a daze and wasn't replying. Her eyes were looking somewhere far away. "....." She put on a strangely symbolic expression that somehow lacked humanity. It might have been because of the cold, but she was trembling an awful lot, and Sayuri was worried. She was probably tired, it was about the right time— they couldn't stay in this cafe much longer. *We should end it here, and go home,* Sayuri thought.

"I'll go settle the bill," she told Hitomi. "Can you wait for me outside? Or should we stay together?"

"Sorry. Can we stay together, for just a little longer?" She sounded too lonely, so Sayuri sat back down. Hitomi was still a frail girl. *She needs someone to support her. I can at least be someone to talk to,* Sayuri thought. She had nothing else to do, too. Although, this might be considered meddling. Sayuri wanted to give this child love; at least, enough to make up for what she didn't give to her actual daughter.

"This must also be some sort of fate... From now on, you can call on me if anything happens," Sayuri promised. "I'll help you, Hitomi-chan. Are you really alright? Your eyes don't seem to be focusing?"

"I'm fine," Hitomi told her. "Although, I'll need to be careful on the way home. If I stumble the wrong way, I could get run over by a car. I just had my

life saved earlier; I have to take care of it.” If they knew that, when they died, they would be sent into a bizarre alternate dimension, where they would be played around with by monsters before being eaten, anyone would want to live as long as possible. “Don’t worry too much about me. It might be because I’m tired, but I can feel my consciousness going dim... Really, I’m fine.” Hitomi firmly raised her head, and gave a human smile. “I was just watching a little TV.”

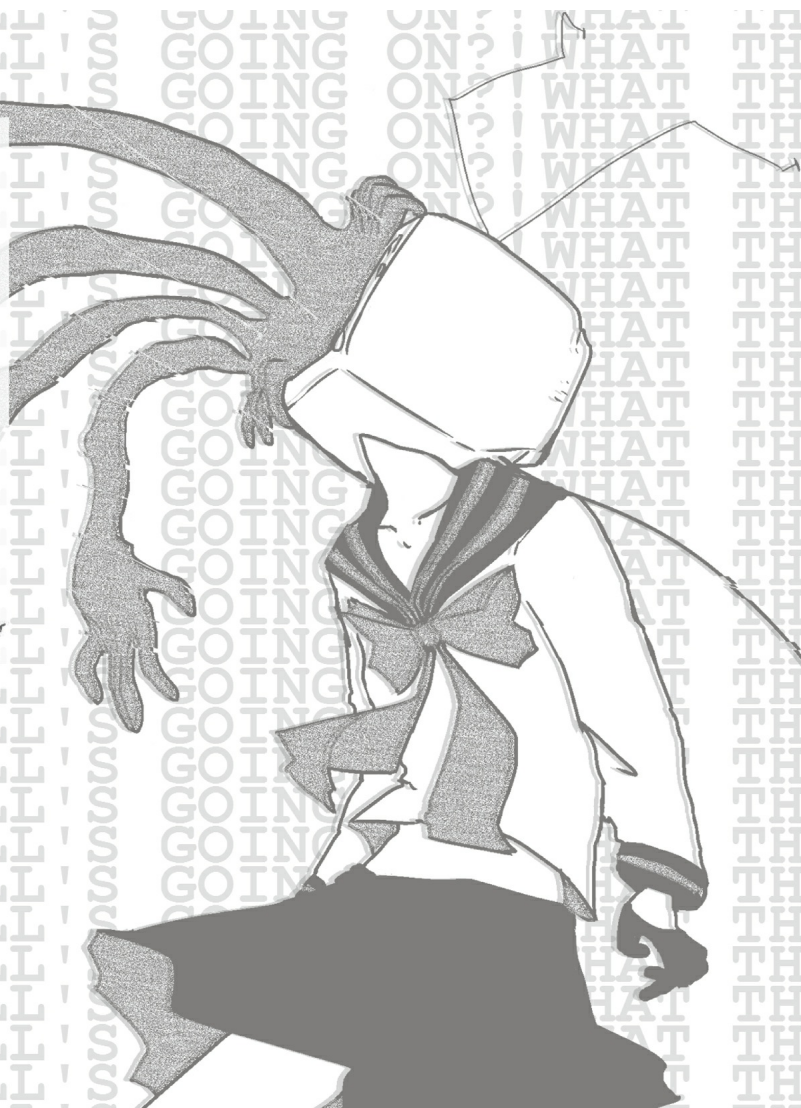




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